

Nixon's Compromise

Political Need for Pullouts Is Balanced Against Generals' Wish for Flexibility

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 21 — The first reactions here to President Nixon's latest report on Vietnam focused on his obvious effort to balance the political pressure for more troop withdrawals against the military's request for a show of strength on the battlefield in the next few months. The President

found his compromise in the kind of annual timetable that he had refused to proclaim last autumn. He committed himself to the minimum withdrawal rate of 12,000 men a month over the coming year. But he left his generals free to argue for slowdowns and speed-ups as the course of battle changes, provided only that they scale down to \$284,000 men by next spring.

Mr. Nixon's speech last night was also notable for its strong new appeal for negotiation of a political settlement.

Despite his optimistic reading of the military situation and his contention that a "just peace" was now in sight, Mr. Nixon went out of his way to encourage the Soviet Union and North Vietnam to join him on what he called "a better, shorter path to peace."

In this, he reflected the views of some of his advisers who see no possibility of real disengagement from Southeast Asia without negotiation and of some who remain convinced that Hanoi is at this moment trying to choose between a painful war of attrition and a more forthcoming attitude at the conference table.

Movement in 'Right Direction'

Presumably, Mr. Nixon's choice of tactics at this stage will be sufficient to meet his immediate political problems. His minimum withdrawal schedule would still meet his basic desire to get American troops out of ground combat in Vietnam before the start of the 1972 election campaign. In the meantime, most Americans will probably endorse the view of the Senate majority leader, Mike Mansfield, that the movement at least "is continuing in the right direction—out."

Only a few of Mr. Nixon's potential Democratic rivals in 1972, led by Senator Edmund S. Muskie of Maine, publicly criticized the speech as too am-

biguous and the troop withdrawal formula, as too elastic. They were particularly disturbed by the President's resolve to base future judgments on the military action in Laos and Cambodia as well as in South Vietnam.

But it is precisely this concern here with the new situation in Cambodia and with the festering problem of Laos that has complicated the Administration's view of the war and kept alive the hopes of some leading officials for a settlement by negotiation.

Mr. Nixon has long heard suggestions from the Pentagon, for instance, that he forget about negotiations. Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird never has placed much faith in the Paris peace talks and has urged that everything be risked on a relatively rapid troop withdrawal and transfer of combat duty to the South Vietnamese Army.

Combat Victory Foreseen

The Joint Chiefs of Staff and other military commanders have tended to view political compromise as unnecessary. They have felt that the allied forces were making considerable progress on the ground and have predicted frustration if not outright defeat for the North Vietnamese, if only American troops are not withdrawn too hastily.

The President has thus far managed with a combination of these approaches: "Vietnamization" of the war effort and American troop withdrawals to persuade Americans that the end was near, combined with "pacification" and other military activity to sap the strength of the enemy forces.

At the advice of his diplomatic advisers, however, Mr. Nixon has also kept open an invitation to serious negotiations. And though the words in which he discusses negotiation undergo only subtle changes, he appeared particularly eager to stress this approach in last night's statement.

The fear that Hanoi will extend the war deeper into Laos and Cambodia is one reason for this emphasis. Though judged here to be exhausted by war and overextended throughout Indochina, the North Vietnamese are respected in Washington for their tenacity.

Peril of Wider War Seen

If they widen the war, American disengagement will become

even more difficult, no matter how successful the operations inside South Vietnam. Even if they were only to occupy Eastern Laos and Cambodia and threaten South Vietnam with massive invasion, the costly American effort to disengage slowly could turn out to have been a waste.

Mr. Nixon is hesitating on Cambodia's request for military aid because he does not wish to provoke Hanoi into a wider conflict. He is being told that the North Vietnamese are probably facing difficult decisions at this stage and that he must combine a show of confidence with signs of interest in a political settlement to help persuade them to negotiate.

The conviction that Hanoi has not yet totally rejected the idea of negotiation accounts for the White House's eager interest last week in reports of a possible Soviet interest in a new Geneva conference. The President believes that Moscow will make no move on Vietnam unless authorized to do so by Hanoi. And though the latest report of Soviet interest in negotiation has since been officially contradicted, Mr. Nixon went out of his way last night to try to keep it alive.

Thus Mr. Nixon's speech was essentially a three-pronged effort. The first part dealt with his immediate problem of having to announce more troop withdrawals. His peroration exuded confidence that the end was in sight and that the enemy had miscalculated at every turn.

But the heart of the statement was a diplomatic appeal calling "upon our adversaries to join us in working at the conference table."