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Mr. Nixon's Vietnam Plan...

The hopes of the country and the world for an era of peace ride with the major new proposals President Nixon is to announce tonight for the Vietnam negotiations in Paris. East-West relations as a whole and the prospects for general détente could be advanced further by a Southeast Asian settlement than by any other diplomatic achievement now pending, except only for a solution in the Middle East.

The new American proposals on Vietnam evidently have been in discussion for some weeks between the President and his Paris negotiators, Ambassadors Bruce and Habib, who are known to favor an imaginative effort to break the deadlock; they reportedly suggested a range of ideas and were given the opportunity in Ireland last weekend to make their case in person. But the ultimate decision is clearly Mr. Nixon's.

There are indications of strain between the United States and the South Vietnamese Government, which was consulted about the plan; President Thieu reportedly turned his back on Ambassador Bunker at a recent official reception. That is not necessarily a bad sign. General Thieu's interest lies in keeping the United States in Vietnam and his government in power. The American interest lies in finding a compromise with the Communists to end the war and permit an honorable American withdrawal. Strains between Washington and Saigon are inevitable if the United States takes the lead in exploring a compromise settlement in Paris.

There have been rumors that Mr. Nixon will suggest negotiation of a standstill ceasefire as one element in a package proposal. That is an approach The Times has urged for some time as the one most likely to achieve results. Properly presented, it could amount to an offer to divide power provisionally in South Vietnam on the basis of the political, military and territorial status quo. But there are undoubtedly other forward-looking options that might attract Hanoi and the Vietcong into serious negotiations.

The question the world will ask as it listens to Mr. Nixon tonight is whether he has framed a proposal on which it would be to Hanoi's interest to negotiate. Mr. Nixon has denied that he is planning a "propaganda gimmick" and his assurance on this undoubtedly can be accepted. But the real question is not that; it is whether he is seeking a negotiated compromise or a negotiated victory.

Despite all the reports of pacification successes and military gains, the fact is that the war in South Vietnam has not been won. It has changed form, but it goes on as a small-unit, guerrilla conflict. Saigon and Washington cannot expect to win at the peace table what they have not conquered on the ground. If that conclusion governs Mr. Nixon's proposals tonight, they will have a chance of success.

...and the Forgotten War

In November 1968 the American air war against North Vietnam came to a halt. But the squadrons that had pounded the Communists almost daily for 45 months remained. They were shifted to ground support missions in South Vietnam and Laos, attacks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and, more recently, to targets in Cambodia. The headlines gradually faded, but the air war did not.

The cruel dimensions of this forgotten war have been brought to attention again by the latest report of Senator Kennedy's Judiciary Subcommittee on Refugees. In Cambodia, thousands of civilian casualties have been inflicted and those driven from their homes by all forms of combat operations now number a million over and beyond the country's 400,000 ethnic Vietnamese.

In Laos, the subcommittee's investigators report almost 300,000 refugees, 60 per cent of whom have fled their homes since February. The Meo and Lao Teung hill tribes among whom the United States recruited its parliamentary forces have been decimated.

In South Vietnam, more than half a million refugees are listed on official registers. Three million others out of a population of eighteen million—while no longer classified officially as "refugees"—are still living in urban shantytowns and resettlement camps. Meanwhile, civilian casualties from allied and enemy attacks challenge the claim in Washington and Saigon that the war is winding down substantially. The subcommittee estimates a total of 150,000 civilian casualties in the last year, including perhaps 35,000 dead.

This human misery, much of it generated by American bombing and other military activity, may help explain why the reputed "successes" of the Vietnamization program fail to discourage the Communists. Saigon claims its "control" of the population is widening; the Communists bank on deepening disaffection.

Some analysts, as a result, believe a unique moment has arrived when both sides may feel they can negotiate from strength and an imaginative American proposal might well trigger negotiation of a provisional political settlement. American withdrawals of ground troops can further Vietnamize the killing but they cannot end it. Only a negotiated settlement can end the human tragedy Vietnam has experienced for a quarter-century.