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## A Plan to End the War

President Nixon's far-reaching five-point proposal for the Paris talks, including a ceasefire in place, fully warrants its advance description as a "major new initiative" for peace. Along with the recent eight-point Vietcong plan, it provides for the first time a realistic agenda both sides can accept for the serious private negotiations needed to achieve a compromise solution.

The offer of a ceasefire in place, as part of a general move to end the war, implies a willingness to accept the status quo—political, military and territorial—as the basis of a provisional settlement. This impression is reinforced by Mr. Nixon's emphasis on his April 20 "principles," proposing a "fair political solution" that would reflect "the existing relationship of political forces" within South Vietnam and fairly "apportion" political power.

The wider Indochina conference Mr. Nixon proposes presumably would initiate negotiations on Laos and Cambodia and, once Paris agreements on Vietnam are in sight, incorporate all into a general settlement for the area. Mr. Nixon also offers to negotiate an agreed timetable for the complete American withdrawal Hanoi demands. His final proposal, immediate release of prisoners of war, is well justified by the rest of his plan.

Earlier American insistence on winner-take-all elections does not appear in the new Nixon plan. In fact, the word elections does not appear as such. The emphasis on a negotiated settlement is proof of a flexible and realistic approach.

Mr. Nixon rejects the Communist proposal that the three top leaders of the Saigon government be removed before negotiation of a political settlement. But his formula does not exclude some Communist participation in the Saigon Government as well as in the National Assembly.

Negotiation of a standstill cease-fire, however, would put initial emphasis on defining the status quo. It would presumably mean a regional division of power at the start rather than an effort, after three decades of bitter conflict, to try to share power at the center immediately through the provisional coalition government the Communists propose.

There appear to be no pre-conditions in the Nixon plan. The Communists are not asked to accept all five points, although they are interlocking, or any single point, entirely or in principle, before opening negotiations. It would appear that parts of the package—such as the standstill ceasefire, the prisoner release, the political settlement and the wider Indochina conference—could be implemented as they are agreed. A timetable for complete American withdrawal could even be fixed, but its terminal date would have to depend on the over-all settlement.

All these matters will presumably become more clear as the proposals are discussed in Paris. What seems evident is a desire to be flexible, to discuss anything in any order, if the Communists will withdraw their earlier preconditions that, before negotiations start, the United States agree to dismantle the Saigon leadership and fix a date for unilateral withdrawal.

Mr. Nixon has made a valid offer to the adversary, one deserving of serious and profound exploration in extended private negotiations. It is an offer that will reveal whether the Communists really want to achieve a compromise. Hanoi can ask no more as an American opening bid.