

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, March 7 — Six years ago tomorrow the first American ground combat unit, 3,500 marines, landed in Vietnam. Their announced mission was to protect U.S. bases. As late as June, 1965, a State Department spokesman said that was still the role of the rapidly growing American force — though if fired upon, he said, “our troops naturally return the fire.”

The furtive way Lyndon Johnson got us into a land war in Asia has been followed by so many other deceptions that we are almost numb to them. What matters now, to most Americans, is not so much truth as just getting out. We want to liquidate the disastrous process that began six years ago.

Since President Nixon began withdrawing troops, there has really been only one central issue for the United States in Indochina: Would it be a complete withdrawal, with that fixed aim and by a time certain, or would it be a conditional withdrawal, indefinite in extent and timing? Events make increasingly clear how significant that issue is.

There are elements within the Nixon Administration that favor a fixed commitment to total withdrawal, possibly including Secretary of Defense Laird. The reason is that the “Korean solution” of leaving a large residual American force is unattractive in budgetary and strategic terms. It would be a hostage to Vietnamese politics, always in danger of either having to leave or having to call more Americans back to help.

Indeed, the U.S. negotiating position at the Paris peace talks does not envisage a Korean settlement. The delegation under Ambassador Bruce is operating on the theory that, if the other side ever takes up our proposal for a

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cease-fire in place, the talks would move on to discuss the terms of a total withdrawal.

Yet the President has declined to make total withdrawal his policy. His recent statements, in fact, have tended to make the end of American involvement in Indochina recede into the even more indefinite distance.

At his news conference last week he said that “as long as there are American prisoners of war in North Vietnam, we will have to maintain a residual force in South Vietnam.” At another point he indicated that our withdrawal depended on North Vietnamese forces leaving the South and Laos and Cambodia: “If that happens, we will be glad to withdraw.”

Why does Mr. Nixon take this position?

The prisoner argument is really the other way. We may all wish that North Vietnam would make the gesture of releasing the 460 Americans we believe it holds (not 1,600, as Mr. Nixon said). But we know that the one sure way of getting them out is to end the war and withdraw.

A more serious contention is that delaying and conditioning our exit will give time for “Vietnamization” to work—for the South Vietnamese to be strong enough to protect themselves without our help. But the Laos operation, however it turns out, has shown that in terms of any imaginable time and effort, the goal is a will-o'-the-wisp.

In the limited area of the Laos invasion, American forces have flown more than 20,000 helicopter sorties and 2,500 bombing missions in the last month. Yet Vice President Ky of South Vietnam said last week that the United

States had not done enough. On the basis of the Laos experience, with all the difficulties encountered by Saigon's troops, when can we ever imagine them ready to operate without American air cover?

The only thing that a delayed and indefinite withdrawal can gain is time. And there we come to the real reason for the Nixon policy. Its aim must be to hold the Saigon Government together at least until the American Presidential election next year. Mr. Nixon wants to be the candidate who withdrew most of our forces without “losing South Vietnam.”

The question is whether Mr. Nixon's re-election is worth the cost of his way of withdrawing—the cost in human lives and damage to the social fabric. For his policy is necessarily one of aggressive withdrawal, depending on immense air activity to carry on the fighting as our ground troops leave. The Washington correspondent of *The Financial Times* of London, John Graham, described the effects of the policy succinctly when he wrote recently of the Nixon Administration: “It is bombing four countries, and has invaded two, in order to withdraw from one.”

In the six years since those marines landed, American weapons have killed upward of 200,000 civilians in Indochina and made several million people refugees. Whatever the original reason, that scale of destruction is an indecency. And under the Nixon policy it will go on indefinitely.

Mr. Nixon is gambling, politically, on the belief that low U.S. casualties and continuing gradual withdrawals of ground troops will satisfy American opinion—in other words, that Americans will show no moral concern for death and disintegration among other people. I think he is wrong.