

Let's Unite on Vietnamization

By MAXWELL D. TAYLOR

WASHINGTON — Notwithstanding our past divisions over Vietnam policy, is it not possible for us to rally behind the President's Vietnamization program long enough to give it a fair trial?

It is hard to oppose the objective of Vietnamization: an expeditious disengagement of American forces on honorable terms, without the sacrifice of important American interests. It is difficult to challenge its feasibility which derives from two important developments.

First, the constantly improving battlefield performance of the South Vietnamese attests to the success of the prolonged American effort—dating back to the Eisenhower Administration—to build up indigenous forces to the point that they would be able to take over full responsibility for the defense of their country. At the same time, while South Vietnam's strength is increasing, the heavy battle losses suffered by the Communists from 1963 to the present have drastically reduced their combat capabilities.

These favorable developments justify considerable confidence in the ultimate success of Vietnamization, which has the added advantage of containing elements of appeal for most shades of American opinion.

Since our involvement in Vietnam, there have been only three strategic alternatives from which to choose—to advance, to retreat, or to stand fast—although variants may be formed from elements of all three. Unfortunately, since 1967 it has been impossible to rally public opinion behind any

Cambodia and Laos Incursions Can Advance American Withdrawal

one of these alternatives. To advance offends the doves, to retreat offends the hawks, and to stand fast exasperates the impatient who constitute the national majority.

For the doves, Vietnamization promises an immediate reduction in American combat participation and battle casualties. The hawks cannot view it as a dishonorable retreat for Vietnamization is essentially a changing of the guard which, if conducted prudently, need cause no loss of combat effectiveness. For the impatient, it offers a way to circumvent the stalemated negotiations in Paris and proceed toward a termination of American combat participation despite Hanoi's obstructionism.

The cross-border operations into Cambodia and Laos have created opposition to Vietnamization among those who see these operations as regrettable expansions of the war. Actually, the incursions and Vietnamization are related only by the fact that the former facilitates the latter, and both are made possible by the improved military situation noted earlier—the growing military strength of South Vietnam and the declining strength of the enemy. It is possible to oppose the Cambodian and Laos incursions—I do not—and still to unite behind Vietnamization.

Vietnamization is not without its disadvantages and uncertainties. It is too slow for some and operates on no fixed schedule. It does not promise in itself a complete withdrawal of all Americans or a complete termination of American military or economic aid. Indeed, there is a strong intimation

that both will continue for some time. Nor does Vietnamization provide answers to such troubling questions as the fate of Cambodia and Laos and the safe return of American prisoners of war.

Despite these imperfections, the many advantages of Vietnamization warrant it a serious trial. It is sure to produce results quicker than would negotiations even if Hanoi were to change course and demonstrate a sincere desire for substantive talks. But even with goodwill on both sides, it would take months, possibly years, to reach agreement on such complex issues as a cease-fire which offers no advantage to either side; the withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces from the South; a guarantee of political rights for those Vietcong who accept amnesty; and the disposition of prisoners held by both sides.

For those in a hurry to get out of the war, I would recommend support of Vietnamization as the shortest and fastest way to disengagement.

The uncertainties about Cambodia, Laos and our prisoners of war are with us regardless of what course we elect to pursue. Under any circumstances, Hanoi will try to use our prisoners to extract some kind of ransom. To be prepared for such tactics we need a posture of increased strength derived from South Vietnamese military superiority over the North and a strong U.S. strategic reserve outside Vietnam ready for contingencies.

The successful implementation of the Vietnamization program contributes to this posture and, at the same time, presents Hanoi with the prospect of having to work out the final settlement primarily with their uncompromising enemies in Saigon.

Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, retired, served as Ambassador to Vietnam, 1964-65, and as a special consultant to the President, 1965-69.

Dear Sir:

I wrote, in the piece commenting [Feb. 16] on Mr. Rothbard's anarchism, about the "poised antistatism represented by . . ." Mises, Hayek, etc. The word was misprinted, appearing as "paired." —WM. F. BUCKLEY JR.