

Let's Hear From Hanoi

One American dying in combat is one too many. But our goal is no American fighting man dying in any place in the world. Every decision I have made in the past, and every decision I will make in the future, will have the purpose of achieving that goal.—President Nixon in his Wednesday night address on Vietnam.

By JAMES RESTON

In his latest speech on the Indochina war, President Nixon said he would not set a specific date for "ending American involvement" in the conflict because this might put the remaining American troops in danger and interfere with the release of our prisoners of war.

This raises two intriguing questions, one for President Nixon and the other for officials of North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front:

First, would President Nixon set a date for the total withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam if officials on the other side guaranteed the release of all prisoners of war and the safe evacuation of all American troops?

And second, would Hanoi and the N.L.F. agree to release the prisoners and guarantee the safe withdrawal of the American expeditionary forces if they got a guarantee that all Americans would be out of that country by a certain date?

It should be possible to clarify these two points. As things now stand, Washington is assuming that it cannot get guarantees for the safe withdrawal of its P.O.W.'s and the rest of its men, and Hanoi is assuming that it cannot get a guarantee that all U.S. troops will be out by a date certain, say the end of this year; but the two questions have not been asked or even raised as a basis for negotiating a compromise peace.

Let's hear from Hanoi on these points. Officials there have stated that their main objective is to get rid of all American troops. President Nixon has now said "Vietnamization has succeeded." He has also said in the same speech that "the American involvement in Vietnam is coming to an end; the day the South Vietnamese can take over their own defense is in sight. Our goal is a total American withdrawal from Vietnam."

He added: "In my campaign for the Presidency, I pledged to end American involvement in this war. I am keeping that pledge and I expect to be held accountable by the American people if I fail." To be sure, there were a lot of other more ambiguous remarks in the speech, but as the Senate G.O.P. whip, Senator Robert Griffin of Michigan said, "in a practical sense, he (Mr. Nixon) did set a date certain for ending U.S. involvement—Election Day 1972."

The main question about the President's speech now is not all the claims he made for Cambodia and Laos or the rhetoric about achieving "the great goals" for which so many Americans have died, but how to achieve the one

objective both sides in the war seem to agree on—the total withdrawal of all American forces and the safe repatriation of all prisoners of war on both sides.

It is not necessary to risk embarrassment by public exploitation of an exchange of guarantees on a date of withdrawal and the safe repatriation of all American troops. Mr. Nixon has quick and private lines of communication to Hanoi. He can get a message through in half an hour, and they can get through to him just as fast.

Also, private direct communication is possible between the two warring sides in many capitals of the world, free of the nosy press, and the two questions can be raised indirectly and secretly by the French and other third countries if either Mr. Nixon or the Hanoi officials wish to clarify the timing of a safe withdrawal.

Even if an attempt to get an answer to the two questions failed, no risk would be involved. The balance of power would not be affected. Even the propaganda war would not be substantially changed by discreet diplomatic exploration.

Hanoi and the Vietcong have far more prisoners of war in Saigon's hands than they have American and South Vietnamese prisoners, and there is little chance that any prisoners released would ever return to the battle.

Consequently, the very least that could be achieved by a deal on total safe withdrawal of the Americans by a certain date would be a clarification of the realities of the present situation.

Mr. Nixon said in his latest report on the war that he understood why people were skeptical of promises "that American involvement in this war is coming to an end." They were skeptical, he explained, "because many times in the past in this long and difficult war, actions have been announced from Washington that were supposed to lead to a reduction of American involvement in Vietnam, and over and over these actions resulted in more Americans going to Vietnam, and more casualties in Vietnam."

The problem now is to get the issue of a specific date for withdrawal out of the realm of speculation and down to a foundation of fact. Mr. Nixon is only guessing that Hanoi will not let him get his P.O.W.'s and the rest of his men out safely by a certain date, and his critics are only guessing that by setting such a date he can surely get his men safely out.

But the mails still work, if not much else. The questions are obvious even if the answers are not sure, and as the man said who kissed the prett, you never know unless you try.