

Did Hanoi Open a Door?

In the face of President Nixon's frequently expressed desire for a negotiated settlement of the Indochina war, the Administration has taken a strangely negative approach to Hanoi's latest—if highly ambiguous—peace overtures. Doors toward negotiation were opened a crack on April 29 by the North Vietnamese and Vietcong representatives but instead of exploring where they led, Ambassador David Bruce last week either ignored them or seemed to slam them shut, presumably on instructions from Washington.

The Vietcong offer to negotiate local ceasefires with American military units in South Vietnam was denounced as a "sham" by Mr. Bruce because Saigon's troops would not be included prior to a political settlement. Yet Defense Secretary Laird repeatedly has said that the American ground combat role would be over by summer, except for self-defense. Why then would it not be in the American interest to avoid the need for defensive combat? Moreover, as local ceasefire negotiations with Americans spread, they might de-escalate the fighting generally and open the way toward a political accommodation between Saigon and the Communists.

Mr. Bruce ignored the hint repeated three times by Hanoi's chief negotiator, Xuan Thuy, that the Communists would "discuss" a date for American withdrawal and the release of American prisoners as part of a package deal. Previously, Hanoi had insisted that Washington fix a date for withdrawal as a pre-condition for discussion of the prisoner issue. If the pre-condition now has been removed, exploration of the Communist proposal might open the way for a wider-ranging negotiation covering a full ceasefire and a political settlement. The first step toward the Geneva accords of 1954 was a discussion about sick and wounded prisoners of war between the French and Communist Viet Minh military.

Perhaps the most important opening Hanoi's negotiator presented on April 29 was the suggestion of a private meeting to discuss the new Communist proposals. But instead of taking up this first known offer of secret talks since his arrival in Paris last year, Mr. Bruce initially rejected all the Communist proposals out of hand and finally made a public reply on a critical issue that can only be discussed fruitfully in private. In so doing, he appeared to retreat from one of President Nixon's most important peace proposals of the past two years. That proposal eliminated previous American insistence that Hanoi agree explicitly to the withdrawal of its troops, as well as those of the United States, from South Vietnam.

"If North Vietnam wants to insist that it has no forces in South Vietnam," Mr. Nixon said on May 14, 1969, "we will no longer debate the point provided that its forces cease to be there." But when Hanoi last month said that "all the troops participating in the war"—presumably including the North Vietnamese—could "rapidly regain their homes" after an agreement on an American withdrawal date, Mr. Bruce not only insisted on debating the point but debated it in public. While claiming that the 1969 offer still stood, he publicly asked Hanoi to affirm that it is "now prepared to withdraw North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia" and to state over what period the withdrawal would be accomplished.

Finally, Mr. Bruce made no known effort either publicly or privately to probe the significance for Vietcong troops of Hanoi's statement that "all the troops participating in the war" could "rapidly regain their homes." Is this a Communist offer of a "go-home" ceasefire as a substitute for the "standstill ceasefire" proposed by Mr. Nixon?

Ambassador Bruce's response and lack of it last week could appear to the world as an effort by the Nixon Administration to forestall negotiation—unless such ambiguous Communist overtures in Paris are thoroughly and privately explored in depth.