

The Diplomatic Tangle

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, June 10—In his life-long study of the art of diplomacy, Sir Harold Nicholson reached the conclusion that imprecision of language was one of the greatest barriers to successful negotiation between nations, and this is proving to be true once more in the Paris talks on Vietnam.

Scarcely a day goes by without some official here in Washington assuring the American people that the U.S. is "withdrawing" its troops from Vietnam, or without some official on the other side demanding that we set a date for "withdrawal." But the more they talk, the more vague the meaning of "withdraw" becomes.

One day officials here talk about withdrawing "all American troops" from Vietnam and occasionally "from Indochina," which is not the same thing. Another day, they speak of withdrawing "all ground troops" from Vietnam, which could mean leaving the Air Force and the aircraft carriers behind.

Similarly, the North Vietnam and Liberation Front officials are masters of the art of obscuring their meaning behind ambiguous language. For when they demand that the United States announce "a date certain for withdrawal" it is never clear whether they mean withdraw all American troops physically from Vietnam and/or Laos and Cambodia, or whether they mean "withdraw" all military and economic aid from Saigon as well.

The result is that we are all left to guess at the intentions of the negotiators, and the tragedy of it is that the prisoners of war and their anxious families are caught in this thicket of two-faced words.

Here, for example, is President Nixon saying in his last press conference: "It always comes back to the same thing. If we end our involvement in Vietnam [another and more sweeping phrase] and set a date, they will agree

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to discuss prisoners—not release them. . . ."

On the other hand, here is former Secretary of Defense Clark M. Clifford putting forward a more precise plan to "end our participation in the war cleanly and permanently" and adding that he has reason to believe his plan would be accepted by the other side. He is at least precise in his proposals:

"The United States," he says, "would agree to: (1) withdraw all U.S. military personnel from South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia by Dec. 31, 1971; (2) end all ground, air and naval activity by U.S. forces in South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia by the same date.

"North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front would agree to: (1) return all U.S. prisoners, held by North Vietnam and the N.L.F., within thirty days from the date of the joint announcement by Hanoi and Washington of this agreement; (2) refrain from attacks that would threaten the safety of U.S. military personnel during the period of withdrawal."

Mr. Clifford added that he believed that language could also be agreed upon that would provide for no reprisals during or after the period of disengagement, but instead of being asked to prove his point, he was criticized by the White House spokesman for playing politics with the war and raising false hopes on the prisoner issue.

Honest men can and do, of course, differ fundamentally on Mr. Clifford's terms, but at least he was clear, and presumably can demonstrate that Hanoi and the N.L.F. agree to his formula. The need at this point is to cut away the tangle of obscurities and get at least a concise basis for discussion.

All we have now is a propaganda battle and this can only get worse by

involving the negotiations in subjective Presidential politics. Even before the White House lashed out at Clifford without even finding out what evidence he had that his plan would be accepted by the enemy, Senator Edward Kennedy was implying in public that President Nixon was holding back his main negotiating card until it could be a factor in the 1972 Presidential election.

This is probably just a sample of what we are going to get later on in the campaign, and the closer we get to the voting, the more difficult it will be to get a clear definition of the terms of peace from either side.

Clark Clifford is obviously a loyal Democrat, but on this issue of the war he broke with President Johnson precisely because he put peace above party, and has now come forward with a plan for the same reason.

Accordingly, the sharp White House rejection and charges of political motivation against Clifford tell us something about the Administration's talk of "withdrawing" from Vietnam.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the Administration has not yet made up its mind on so clear and final a withdrawal as Clifford proposes. It is not imprecise by accident but on purpose, and it is clearly irritated with Clifford because he was putting forward a plan which might save our prisoners and other troops but place the South Vietnamese Government in jeopardy.

This is the heart of the problem. The Administration is not saying that Clifford's plan would not "get the boys back home." It is saying that his Dec. 31 deadline is "so precipitate that it would not give the South Vietnamese the opportunity to defend themselves and determine their own future."

That rather than the prisoners is what explains the Administration's calculated imprecisions. The stability of South Vietnam is still Mr. Nixon's first priority.