



President May Be Outsmarting Himself

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STEP BY STEP, in a slow inexorable way, actions on the ground in Asia are working with the politics of Washington and the diplomacy of Paris to smoke the President out on Vietnam.

Indeed, the administration's position is now being eroded so rapidly that even those of us unremittingly critical of the war must be concerned. For it is not clear that Mr. Nixon can even sustain this country's clear moral obligation to give military and economic assistance to a Saigon government willing to keep up the fight.

The most important developments have been on the ground. Communist troops have scored undoubted recent successes in Cambodia and Laos. These actions are a certain gauge that the war, with all its frustrations and horrors, is not going to go away.

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WITH THE ISSUE sure to stay alive, the settlement proposal advanced by former Defense Secretary Clark Clifford takes on great significance. It approaches the possibility of trading American troop withdrawal for release of American prisoners in a fashion that differs significantly from the other major proposal in the field — the Hatfield-McGovern amendment.

The amendment provides that the President stipulate withdrawal of American troops by the end of this year, conditional upon Communist agreement to return American prisoners. The administration can, and does, argue that such an offer depends entirely on the Communists living up to their word.

Clifford's proposal is that the President

set withdrawal for the end of this year, but that the proposal become operative only if the Communists return all American prisoners within 30 days of the proclamation. Since American withdrawal depends on prior Communist performance, the whole issue of good faith is bypassed.

Already the White House has been obliged to give ground in its public stance on the prisoners. Previously, President Nixon has at times left the country with the impression that prisoner return was the only obstacle to a pullout of troops. In response to the Clifford proposal, however, the White House made it crystal clear that support of the government of South Vietnam, as well as release of prisoners, was behind the continued American presence in the war.

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IF THE COMMUNISTS indicate a public interest in the Clifford proposals, or some variant, the President would find himself in an awful fix. He would have to defend the principle that Americans were being allowed to rot in prison and die in battle just so this country could maintain the regime of President Nguyen Van Thieu in Saigon.

The key issue under these circumstances is the issue of what kind of help the United States might appropriately give to Saigon under an agreed settlement with the Communists.

What all this means is that Mr. Nixon is once more on the verge of outsmarting himself. Unless he moves rapidly towards a settlement soon, he is apt to find himself under overwhelming pressure to accept terms that are truly shameful.