

Withdrawal When?

The brusque rejection by the White House of former Defense Secretary Clark M. Clifford's proposal to set a fixed date for withdrawal of all American forces from Indochina in return for the release of American prisoners reinforces doubts about the Administration's policies in respect both to negotiation and Vietnamization.

White House spokesmen argue that Communist negotiators in Paris have not yet agreed to do anything more than *discuss* prisoner release after a withdrawal date has been set. But the Administration is evidently unwilling to test the contention of Mr. Clifford and others that Hanoi is indeed ready to accept such an arrangement. Furthermore, the President seems clearly to believe that the United States has not redeemed a pledge on which he has previously insisted as a condition of American withdrawal: "that we give the South Vietnamese a reasonable chance to defend themselves against Communist aggression." Many millions of Americans, including this newspaper, believe on the contrary that the United States long ago more than fulfilled whatever obligations it may have had in this respect.

If, after years of deep and direct American commitment, a one-million-man South Vietnamese army, trained and equipped by the United States, cannot now deal with a numerically inferior foe, it never will. The President's insistence that ultimate American withdrawal be contingent upon South Vietnamese self-sufficiency is a formula for indefinite involvement.

Speaking for the Administration in Senate debate the other day, Senator Dole of Kansas charged that the McGovern-Hatfield amendment, which in its present form closely parallels Mr. Clifford's proposal, would give away the leverage the President still possessed to obtain release of American prisoners. This might be a persuasive argument if realistic negotiations were going on for prisoner release. But as long as Mr. Nixon follows his present policy of withdrawing troops while pursuing the elusive goal of security for Saigon, it is the President who is giving away leverage while holding the prisoners hostage to an interminable conflict.

The failure of the Administration to adopt a more realistic negotiating position, as advocated by Mr. Clifford and others, materially strengthens the argument of supporters of the McGovern-Hatfield amendment, which will be voted on tomorrow in the Senate. Under the circumstances, while retaining our belief that negotiation represents the preferable way of terminating hostilities, we have been driven to the conclusion that the amendment ought to be approved as an expression by the Senate of this country's determination to bring an honorable and speedy end to this futile, wasteful and divisive war.