

Getting Them Out

We Must Set a Date for Total U.S. Withdrawal

By CHARLES W. YOST

There has been from the beginning of the Paris negotiations on Vietnam an eerie mix of misunderstanding and doubletalk. As month followed month, any excuse for misunderstanding has evaporated, but unhappily the compulsion to doubletalk has remained.

The real reason why the negotiations are deadlocked is simply that the primary war aim of Hanoi is to oust the present Saigon Government, and the primary war aim of that Government is to stay in power. Hanoi is quite aware that, as long as President Thieu remains, there will be no opportunity to change the *status quo* in the South except by force. Elections, while not as "efficient" in the totalitarian sense as those in the North, would be almost certain to return to office those carrying out the elections. A general cease-fire, moreover, would merely protect the present Government from military attack. A combination of cease-fire and "free elections" would be an iron-clad formula for maintaining the Thieu Government in power indefinitely.

Yet the objective for which Hanoi has been fighting for more than a decade is to replace that Government by another which would either be under Hanoi's control or at least be so "neutral" or unstable that Hanoi would feel it had a reasonable prospect for obtaining control later on. Otherwise all their efforts and sacrifices since 1960 would have been in vain.

On the other hand, the Saigon Government obviously has no wish or intention to commit suicide by agreeing to be replaced by either a "coalition" or a "neutral" government. Indeed, President Thieu has for the most part been unwilling to dilute his authority, even if it would strengthen his Government, by bringing into it representatives of other significant non-Communist elements in the South. There is no reason whatsoever to believe he would ever do so unless he had to.

We have heard talk recently of the possibility of "Vietnamizing" the negotiations; that is, of the U.S. withdrawing from them and leaving the two sets of Vietnamese face to face alone. This might have the advantage of making unmistakably clear that the Nixon Administration will *not* force a change in the Saigon Government and hence *not* resolve the deadlock which stalls the negotiations. On the other hand, U.S. withdrawal would certainly *not* facilitate agreement between the two Vietnamese Governments. It would only underscore the fact that under present circumstances such agreement is impossible.

My personal view is that it is not the presence of the U.S. at the negotiating table in Paris but the still indeterminate duration of its military presence in South Vietnam which blocks a political settlement. For the U.S. to force a change of government in Saigon at this stage would indeed be highly improper. Perhaps more important, it would run directly counter to our prudent policy of reducing drastically our responsibilities in Vietnam, for we would be assuming direct responsibility for a new political constellation. If there is to be a change in the Saigon Government, it should be made by Vietnamese, not by Americans.

However, if we do nothing more than we are doing now, if we continue to give President Thieu the strong impression that he will have significant, even though reduced, U.S. military support for an indefinite time to come, he will certainly use the means he has to ensure his re-election in October, the political stalemate will continue in Paris, and the fighting will go on unabated.

The best way by which the U.S. might break the deadlock, and might serve many other purposes as well, would be to announce that it is withdrawing all its forces from Vietnam and ending all participation in the war by Dec. 31, 1971, subject only to the condition that the North Vietnamese release all our prisoners by that date. If President Thieu were confronted with the necessity of fighting the war alone after the end of this year, he would be obliged to reassess very soberly his prospects under those circumstances. He might decide he could carry on without changing his Government, and in that case the negotiations would remain deadlocked and the war would continue. Or he might decide, and other political elements in South Vietnam might also decide, that his or their only hope lay in a political compromise, that they should at least find out by negotiation whether there could be an acceptable compromise on the basis of which the war could be ended.

So the setting by the U.S. of a firm and early date for its withdrawal would not only serve overriding U.S. interests, but would also be the best way, probably the only way, by which we could properly facilitate a political settlement and constructively end the deadlock in Paris. In this way we might Vietnamize the peace rather than the war.

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See also Wicker, filed
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