

Mr. Nixon and Vietnam

President Yields a Little Ground But Keeps Freedom to Improvise

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There was general agreement here today that President Nixon gave a little ground last night to all the factions that have been tugging at his Vietnam policy.

It was also agreed that he had yielded nothing of his freedom to keep on improvising tactics in Vietnam as he moves gradually toward the exits. The Saigon Government won an indefinite pledge of final disengagement to ward off the impatient demands to quit now. The advocates of a more rapid pullout won a rate increase, to 14,300 men a month from 12,500. The American military commanders in the field were assured of a still-sizable combat force for the most risky battle season next winter.

Out of all those considerations came the carefully calibrated schedule for the withdrawal of 100,000 men by Dec. 1 and the President's offer to be held accountable, on Election Day in 1972, if he fails to keep his pledge to end the American involvement.

Was There a Date?

The students of Presidential logic had quite a time with that formulation.

Senator Robert F. Griffin of Michigan thought that for all practical purposes the President had thus designated Election Day as the date for final withdrawal. Senator George D. Aiken of Vermont, a Republican and many Democrats regretted the absence of a final date. Senator Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania thought he heard Mr. Nixon speak of a date. A White House spokesman said he didn't.

Mr. Nixon himself, in his address to the nation, had offered repeated assurances of "the end" while arguing vigorously against the wisdom of fixing a date.

If the end of 1972 is to be the date, why not say so? And if it is not the final date, then what kind of "involvement" does the President plan to end in time for an accounting by the voters?

¶The President does not yet know which of these approaches will seem effective and feasible more than a year from now and is determined to retain his flexibility to apply any of them, or some variation.

One Clear, Uniting Theme

The one clear theme that nites the tactical possibilities is the one on which Mr. Nixon dwelt the longest in his address: If the United States announced that it would quit regardless of what the enemy does, he said, it would throw away its principal bargaining counter, invite attack at the most vulnerable moments and leave "in a way that by our own actions consciously turns the country over to the Communists."

Plainly, the President was insisting once again that the stakes in Vietnam, the reputation of American power around the world, the self-respect and composure of Americans at home, and the redemption of the sacrifices made in Indochina require him to "play out the game," as he put it recently, and to do everything that he thinks the country will tolerate to assure the survival of an independent and non-Communist South Vietnam.

As has often been the case at crucial turns in this protracted war, therefore, it comes down to an assessment of the American psyche and political climate. Pressed as never before by doubts about the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos, Mr. Nixon's decline in the polls and controversy over the Calley case, he took a few slaps at the information media, reminded the Democrats who had started and waged the war and showed himself confident in his political calculations.

He has felt since the day he came into office, contrary to the advice of some aides and all the counsel of his critics and the pollsters, that he had more time rather than less to play out the Vietnam string provided he could bring the boys home, eliminate most casualties and promise an end of the draft by 1972.

Basis for His Confidence

¶One reason for his confidence may be his reported belief that he cannot reap much political profit from leaving the war. Most Americans, he is said to feel, are weary of it all and will greet the end only with a tired moan that "it's about time."

The President would suffer politically, it is acknowledged at the White House, if he still appeared mired down next year. But if the pain seems virtually ended for Americans, it is said, he doubts that it would make much difference whether the last soldier had left Indochina or the cost of salvaging something from all the sacrifice was a few billion more or less.

So he feels free to concentrate on how the disengagement is managed. It is that assessment for which he will truly be held accountable next year.

Explaining the Ambiguities

Several theories were offered to explain those ambiguities:

¶The President intends to set a final date of disengagement — tied to the release of American prisoners and, possibly, other conditions — some time next year, when it will have the least impact in Saigon and the greatest political value at home. That date may be in 1972, but it may only be set in 1972 or a later time.

¶The President intends at some militarily safe moment to pronounce the American combat involvement ended but to keep some troops in Vietnam, as he has vowed, until all American prisoners are released and to keep American air power at the ready to "defend" those troops — and Saigon too — against any enemy escalation.

¶The President intended to offer himself as accountable in the election for something less than the total disengagement, citing the withdrawal by then of half a million men from the war zone, the offer to negotiate a "reasonable" final settlement and the virtual end of American casualties, and blaming blaiming North Vietnam for the residual involvement of American advisers and airmen.