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Consent of the Governed

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, April 26—The anti-war demonstration here last week and those still to come suggested again how widespread is the opposition to continuing the war. But there is not yet a shred of evidence to suggest that this demonstrable opposition is causing the Nixon Administration to change its basic course.

Hawks who believe that if the war is not to be "won" it ought not any longer to be fought, doves who consider the American effort anything from ill-advised to immoral, even some military men who are convinced that the Army is being undermined if not destroyed—all these and a broad variety of others constitute a real "popular front" against prolongation of the war. In travels about the country—even in the supposedly militarist South—it is hard for an observer to find anyone who will venture a more warlike opinion than that Mr. Nixon probably knows best about how and when to bring the boys home.

To one who remembers the political atmosphere of 1966 and 1967, even that of the election year 1968, this build-up of opposition seems to carry its own inexorable logic. And, indeed, it is true that Mr. Nixon is withdrawing troops and not sending them in, he is talking of an end to the war, not of victory.

Moreover, as Dr. Ernest May of Harvard has pointed out in a letter to the editor of *The Times*, the President adjusted even further to reality and to domestic political sentiment in his speech of April 7. He asked only a "reasonable chance" for South Vietnam to survive as a non-Communist state, set no conditions for the with-

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drawal of American troops, and made no dire threats against the North Vietnamese.

Yet, Mr. Nixon's fundamental policy remains unchanged, public opinion or no public opinion. He will not set a date for the total and complete withdrawal of American troops, thus maintaining his own pace of disengagement and his own counsel as to any continuing American presence. He will do nothing that threatens the adamantly warlike Thieu regime, either by inciting a coup or by aiding the opposition in the forthcoming South Vietnamese elections.

It is clear, therefore, that Mr. Nixon still is aiming at a so-called "Korean solution"—one in which South Vietnam would survive as a non-Communist state, even with an authoritarian regime, bolstered by ample American military assistance and by a substantial American military presence.

Whatever else it may be, such a "Korean solution" is a formula for an open-ended American presence in Indochina and probably for open-ended warfare, with all its destructions and dangers, in that unhappy peninsula. Mr. Nixon has carefully not made clear how much American power, how many American casualties, what American investments, would be necessary and for how long.

Thus, the President's policy is not truly responsive to the demands of the demonstrators here, nor to the sentiments of an increasing number of Americans, who want to "end the war now" or by the end of the year

or by mid-1972. Remarkably, the situation in the country has so turned around that it might almost be said that Mr. Nixon is the dissenter from the policy of the public-at-large.

He is nevertheless equipped with the foreign policy and political powers of the Presidency, and is quite able to make his "dissent" the official course of the Government. This sets up a strange, inverted confrontation of public opinion (which is not, of course, monolithic) against government power.

Ordinarily, the public official who resists "political pressure" or refuses to do the "popular thing" and stands up against "the easy political course" is honored as a statesman. Undoubtedly, there are those who so honor Mr. Nixon at the moment, and the tone of his recent remarks on Vietnam suggests faintly that he is beginning to consider himself something of a misunderstood hero, beleaguered by an impatient and imprudent populace (and press). And maybe history will so regard him.

But can there be any point of American policy or American interest in the world, or any conceivable outcome to the war in Indochina, that is important enough to risk the disaffection with American purposes of a large part of a generation, and the disillusionment with democratic processes of a large and growing part of the population?

Government by the consent of the governed, after all, presupposes that at some point the consent must be more important than any object of even the most enlightened government. Mr. Nixon ought to weigh carefully whether the hundreds of thousands of marchers on Pennsylvania Avenue have not brought that point perilously close.