

Last Chance for Peace

The extraordinarily optimistic claims for the Vietnamization program made by Secretary of Defense Laird after a combat zone inspection tour have opened the way for a dramatic Presidential announcement next week. Whether soundly based or not, the Laird comments seem designed to provide a rationale permitting President Nixon to step up the present pace of troop reductions in Vietnam. Since even maintenance of the present pace would terminate the American ground presence before the end of next year, Mr. Nixon is in position now, if he is so disposed, to offer the Communists a terminal date for American military withdrawal.

A terminal date would meet the precondition set by Hanoi for reviving the dormant negotiations in Paris to arrange concurrent release of war prisoners, plus a ceasefire. At the present withdrawal rate of 14,300 a month, American troops could be out of Vietnam before Christmas 1972. If the rate is stepped up to 20,000 a month, they could be out by mid-September, almost two months before the American Presidential election.

Mr. Laird responded, "Yes," when asked last weekend in Saigon whether South Vietnam now has "a reasonable chance to survive"—a principal condition set by President Nixon for complete American withdrawal. The so-called "Phase Two" of Vietnamization is under way—a phase marked by the turnover to South Vietnamese forces of increased responsibility for artillery, logistical, helicopter and air combat support.

President Thieu has indicated a desire to retain American air and logistical support into 1973. That could mean a residual force of 40,000 to 50,000 Americans, including ground combat forces to protect American installations. But Mr. Nixon has other interests to consider if he is to make such a commitment now.

Apart from the direct effect on the American Presidential campaign, there is the possibility that such a commitment would trigger an increased military effort by Hanoi to embarrass Mr. Nixon next fall. Reactivation of the Paris negotiations, by contrast, would inhibit re-escalation of the war and take advantage of what little substantial leverage the United States has left in the peace talks.

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It is in Hanoi's interest to terminate the American involvement before November 1972. American air operations continue at a high level, despite ground force reductions. There have been more than seventy raids against North Vietnam this year. More than 70,000 tons of American bombs—almost the same level as in 1967, the last year before the Paris talks—have been dropped monthly on Indochina targets, according to a new Cornell University study.

If Mr. Nixon is re-elected next November with large-scale American air operations still going on and a residual force of 40,000 Americans remaining in South Vietnam, Hanoi must calculate that the President will be under little pressure to withdraw for two to four years longer. The Communists must also reckon with the possibility that Mr. Nixon might even re-escalate if they step up the war in those circumstances.

Mr. Nixon can capitalize on this opportunity by announcing a withdrawal date next week and opening private talks in Paris, letting it be known that agreement must be reached before the withdrawals cut sharply into air operations and planned residual forces. The prospects for successful negotiations have been further increased by Peking's recent shift from opposition to support of the concept of a negotiated settlement. Soviet propaganda has exploited this shift to attack the Chinese, but Moscow is believed still favorable to a political solution.

Mr. Nixon may prefer to announce an interim troop withdrawal target next week but delay negotiations until late spring, after his Peking and Moscow visits. In reality, however, he probably has already had about all the help he can expect from improved relations with the Soviet Union and China. Neither is likely to pressure North Vietnam. A settlement, if it is to be achieved, will have to be negotiated with Hanoi, not with Moscow or Peking. The sooner that negotiation is opened, the greater the chance that it will lead to termination not only of the American involvement but of the war as a whole.