

The Questions Persist

By TOM WICKER

President Nixon is looking strong politically, these days, with Phase Two of his new economic policy in effect and with a faster rate of withdrawal from Vietnam winning headlines. That seems to put him on top of two of the three big issues—Mr. Nixon's personality is the other—with which the Democrats might defeat him next year.

But appearances are not always reflective of the facts, particularly a year before the moment of truth. The personality issue is a constant, and the war and the economy could yet return to plague the President, because both are issues on which, finally, the delivery rather than the promise will count.

The complicated paraphernalia by which Mr. Nixon hopes to control prices and wages, for instance, already seems to be creating loopholes and exemptions about as fast as it writes rules; and it is safe to say that as Pay Board and Price Commission bore deeper into the vast complexities of the American economy, red tape, inequities, oversights and inexplicable rulings will multiply.

Is it possible, for instance, to make an equitable ruling on a question like the following:

If wage increases negotiated after the end of the freeze must be held to about 5.5 per cent, while larger wage increases negotiated before the freeze may go into effect, what about wage increases negotiated during the freeze?

More important politically, how do you make a ruling on such a question appear equitable to those who lose money as a result? How do you explain to some teachers that they can have pay raises retroactive to a date during the freeze and to some others that they cannot? The fact that, in the first case, the school district had raised taxes to cover the increase before the freeze is likely to carry little weight with teachers barred from collecting back pay in other districts.

In such ways, what now looks like a bold effort to curb inflation could become an administrative and political nightmare for Mr. Nixon. Even in wartime conditions, Americans have tended to be irritated and impatient with bureaucratic controls on their pocketbooks.

Moreover, Mr. Nixon's Administration has a history of doing things rather halfheartedly, of trying to please both sides of an issue, with the result that it partially alienates both. This has been true, to cite a few examples, in matters of race relations, on the question of welfare reform, in the ad-

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ministration of poverty programs, and to some extent concerning China. If the wage-price program is administered in the same halfway spirit, if the pressures of big companies and big unions produce too much vacillation and yielding, the aim of curbing inflation while holding down unemployment could be lost in the bureaucratic fog. That, too, could create a backlash against Mr. Nixon by next November.

As for the new announcement on Vietnam, no opponent of the war can fairly ignore the fact that the monthly withdrawal rate will rise from 14,300 to 22,500, and that the casualty rate already has fallen drastically, and may well decline further. Still, there is something curiously incomplete and disappointing about the most recent announcement.

It maintains and extends, for one thing, the fiction that a negotiated settlement of the war—or for all of Southeast Asia—will be facilitated by the retention in Vietnam of American forces; in fact, the North Vietnamese have made it plain that a solid American pledge of total and complete withdrawal by a certain date is prerequisite, for them, to such a settlement. Mr. Nixon may have his reasons for not giving such a pledge, but it is hard to see how the chances for negotiations will be improved by keeping an American residual force in Vietnam, despite his protestations.

Similarly, he repeated the tired old formula that if the North Vietnamese increased infiltration of men and supplies through Laos and Cambodia, American air strikes would have to be stepped up; but on the other hand, he said, a negotiated settlement would mean a total American withdrawal and an end to the air strikes. Hasn't Hanoi given ample evidence, over the years, that it is not to be bombed or threatened into a settlement? And hasn't our vaunted air power shown that it is a lot more effective in raining destruction on native villages than it is at stopping or even slowing infiltration?

So yet another agonizing period of wait-and-see must be gone through, and then no doubt another after that, and perhaps still another. Will there be a Communist offensive? Will there be a further spreading air war: Can all the boys be brought home? Will there ever be an end? Sooner or later, mustn't even Richard Nixon run out of reasons why the war must go on just a little while longer?