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The President's Offer

By JAMES RESTON

So much has been said about President Nixon's new military moves in Vietnam that his new and more specific peace terms may be overlooked and underestimated. For while he talked in warrior language about the "arrogance" and insolence of Hanoi, and backed his warnings with a military challenge to the sea-borne Soviet arms in Haiphong and the rail supplies from China, he also offered what amounts to a date-certain for the "complete withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam within four months."

Maybe, at this solemn hour, it may be more useful to concentrate on his peace terms rather than on his war plans. He has been more specific this time than ever before:

"First," he said, "all American prisoners of war must be returned.

"Second, there must be an internationally supervised cease-fire throughout Indochina [not merely Vietnam].

"Once prisoners of war are released, once the internationally supervised cease-fire has begun, we will stop all acts of force throughout Indochina.

"And at that time we will proceed with a complete withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam within four months [This] would allow negotiations and a political settlement between the Vietnamese themselves. . . ."

Well, maybe this is looking for a very thin ray of light in the dark, but there is nothing here about keeping American air and naval power in Vietnam, or defending the Thieu Government to the end—Mr. Nixon never mentioned Thieu—or relying on elections. The military offer is specific: Release the American prisoners, agree to a supervised cease-fire, and then, within four months, "a complete withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam . . . and a political settlement between the Vietnamese themselves"

This, obviously, leaves some serious questions for both sides. When could

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the cease-fire begin? If this took a long time to arrange, Hanoi would lose its military momentum and give Saigon and Washington room to regroup and resupply. If the cease-fire were arranged quickly, Washington and Saigon would be committed to take the prisoners of war quickly and get all American forces out in four months. There are risks on both sides, but at least Mr. Nixon has suggested a serious and specific basis for negotiations, which may be more hopeful for him and for Hanoi, Moscow and Peking than his mines in Haiphong, his bombs on the Peking-Hanoi railroad, and his exaggerated talk about the immediate threat to the 60,000 American troops, and the honor of the Republic and the peace of the world.

The problem now is to cool the rhetoric, cut the challenges, and the killing and find some way out of the mess. Mr. Nixon sounds very brave and he has taken some terrible risks, for the geography is all on the side of the enemy; and if this mining of the North Vietnamese harbors succeeds, all he will do with his challenges is to force Moscow and Peking together to ship more arms by air or rail from the Soviet Union through China to Hanoi.

The more he talks about "the Communist terror and tyranny" and gives Moscow and Peking three days to get out of Haiphong before the American mines explode, the more he will reunite the two Communist giants and interfere with his dream of a new "generation at peace."

Still, Mr. Nixon has given everybody, including himself, an escape from this dilemma with his latest peace proposals. They are fair enough to be placed before the United Nations for debate. The Secretary General of the U.N. has indicated his willingness to bring the issue before the world peace organization, and this, poor as it is, could be better than the confrontation of mines and arms in Haiphong.

President Nixon, in his speech to the nation, tough as he sounded, gave Hanoi, Moscow, and Peking a more realistic basis for compromise than ever before, and at least his new peace proposals should be tested before his risky military maneuvers create a world crisis.