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Vietnam Withdrawal?

President Nixon's announcement of a further 12,000-man reduction in American troops in Vietnam by Dec. 1 marks essential accomplishment of his primary objective: withdrawal of the half-million American troops President Johnson sent there—without bringing down the Saigon Government. But the removal of combat units from South Vietnam itself unfortunately does not terminate American combat participation in the Indochina war. Nor—for that very reason—does it remove Vietnam as a major campaign issue, despite Mr. Nixon's conviction that it would do so.

American bombing and mining of North Vietnam, Mr. Nixon affirmed yesterday, will continue until there is a negotiated settlement or, at least, substantial progress toward one. Earlier this year, the President said he would expect to keep a residual force of 25,000 or more uniformed Americans in South Vietnam until American prisoners of war were returned, a step that is unlikely before a settlement is achieved.

But the figure of 27,000 United States noncombat troops now scheduled still to be in South Vietnam on Dec. 1 tells only part of the story. The number of uniformed Americans waging air-sea war in Indochina from Thailand, Guam and ships of the Seventh Fleet has been virtually doubled since March to a current total of about 100,000.

Vietnamization, it is now clear, cannot terminate this large-scale involvement of American military men in the Indochina conflict. There are no Vietnamization plans, wisely, for equipping the South Vietnamese Air Force with a capability for bombing North Vietnam or the vast network of Ho Chi Minh trails through Laos. Nor is there any early likelihood that the Vietnamese can take over the crucial role which has been played by American close air support in saving the South Vietnamese army from total disaster during the Communist spring-summer offensive in the Quangtri-Hue-Danang area.

It has always been clear that the war and the killing could not be ended—at best merely Vietnamized—by the Vietnamization program. What has now become equally evident is that Vietnamization cannot terminate large-scale American combat involvement, that only a negotiated settlement can achieve that.

Mr. Nixon no longer can avoid the basic contradiction that since 1969 has dogged his two-track policy, the policy of pursuing Vietnamization and a negotiated settlement simultaneously. Vietnamization is a program of strengthening the Thieu regime in Saigon. Negotiation requires its replacement by a compromise government as part of any possible settlement. Until that reality is faced, neither the war nor American combat participation in it can be ended by this Administration.