

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, July 4—Richard Nixon is approaching a decisive moment in his Presidency. Developments abroad and at home press for a fundamental reappraisal of his policy on Vietnam. His response on that issue in the coming weeks could affect the character that history will give him—as a divisive President or one who, as he wished, helped to bring a shattered country together.

The quickening movement of events on Vietnam is unmistakable. In Paris, the other side in the peace talks has made a specific offer to return all American prisoners if the United States commits itself to early and total withdrawal. In Vietnam, U.S. military leaders are indicating a willingness, indeed a desire, to speed up the pace of troop withdrawals. At home, political support for continuing involvement in Vietnam without limit is visibly crumbling.

The Communist initiative in the Paris talks has the effect of removing an important cosmetic element from the Nixon policy. That is the President's argument that we must keep forces in Vietnam indefinitely in order to get the prisoners freed.

It has been perfectly clear all along that the prisoners were more likely to be released if we got out of the war than if we stayed in—the point now made explicit in Paris. But by emphasizing concern for the prisoners, and talking in extreme terms about their "barbaric" treatment, the President has distracted attention from his more serious reason for refusing to set a final withdrawal date: the fear that such a commitment would undermine the Saigon Government and open the way for a quick Communist takeover in South Vietnam.

Since taking office, Mr. Nixon has not retreated from the objective of assuring an anti-Communist government in Saigon for at least some years ahead. He has tried to win American public acceptance of the burdens involved by use of the prisoner issue and by gradual troop withdrawal.

But now the prisoner issue is effectively neutralized, and public opinion has become disaffected far beyond the point of being satisfied by gradual withdrawal: publication of the Pentagon Papers has only deepened existing

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doubts about the whole basis of the American role in Vietnam.

And American military attitudes are changing. More and more professional officers are desperately worried at the effect of Vietnam on the U.S. Army: the drug addiction, the failed esprit. They fear it will get worse in the last phases of a withdrawal with no declared end. They want the troops home as soon as possible, to begin the re-creation of morale. It was surely no accident when Secretary of Defense Laird said the other day that he could get all the men out by the end of this year, though much equipment would have to be left behind.

All these elements are pushing Mr. Nixon toward a reappraisal of policy. The question is whether he is now ready to set a date for the end of all U.S. military activity in Vietnam and to risk the effect on Saigon.

It is not an easy question for the President. His concern about the possibility of a Communist South Vietnam has behind it the sincerity of lifelong belief. But in the choice he faces, the risks are not all one way.

To stay with the present policy could mean a reduced U.S. force beleaguered in Vietnam next year. It could mean re-election this fall of a rigid Saigon Government unable to accommodate to the changed political circumstances of eventual American withdrawal. It could mean an American public opinion so embittered that it would turn against even the minimum obligations of honor to Vietnam, such as continuing aid.

The effect on his own country ought to concern the President most. Americans are yearning now for a leadership that will bring them together. They are tired of all the overreaching of recent years, the excesses of zeal on one side and another. They must have an end to the symbol of division, our part in the killing in Vietnam.

"The peace we seek to win is not victory over any other people but the peace that comes 'with healing in its wings.'" The words are President Nixon's, in his Inaugural Address.