

A Matter of Trust

By ANTHONY LEWIS

AT HOME ABROAD

PARIS — After an interview with Xuan Thuy, North Vietnam's chief negotiator in the Paris peace talks, two impressions are the strongest: He is utterly confident that his side will win the war it has been fighting in Indochina for 25 years. He is deeply suspicious of American policy and motives.

As the Americans who have dealt with him in the talks have found, Mr. Thuy is articulate, informed and usually affable. His manner in the interview was relaxed, his language not markedly rigid; he laughed now and then as he made some rhetorical thrust.

But he gave no indication that his Government was prepared to give ground on its aims or its negotiating tactics. And the air of confidence was striking. When he said the outcome of the war was "evident now," he smiled as if he were stating the obvious.

His view of the United States Government came out tellingly in the reiterated statement that he did not believe President Nixon intended to withdraw all American forces from Vietnam at anytime. The conditions laid down by the President for setting a withdrawal date, he said, were only "a pretext" to cover a decision against getting out: If North Vietnam gave way on one condition, such as the prisoners, Mr. Nixon would just raise another.

After all that has happened in Vietnam, Hanoi's skepticism about American intentions is not exactly surprising. But its view of the Nixon withdrawal program does indicate how large a gulf still exists between the two sides here in Paris, not only in aims but in understanding of each other.

Most Americans, even some critical of the President's policy, believe that Mr. Nixon has started an irreversible process. The United States is getting out of Indochina; it has no choice in terms of political or military realities. The only real question now is how much more damage will be done to the Indochinese people—and to ourselves—before we finally go.

But Hanoi does not see it that way, and the reason is clear enough. A very wise student of the Vietnam tragedy, and of the talks here, put it as follows: "It is a matter of trust. They just fundamentally mistrust us."

The continuing deadlock on the most emotional and therefore obstructive issue in the talks, the prisoners,

is a result of that mistrust.

The U.S. side in the peace talks cannot see why the North Vietnamese do not make a gesture on the prisoners—provide more complete lists of the Americans held, release some or all at once or make a firm commitment to release them if President Nixon does at last put a terminal date on American military involvement in Indochina.

As the Americans see it, such steps would cost Hanoi nothing. While most unusual in a war—prisoners are normally left till the end of hostilities, as Hanoi points out—it would improve North Vietnam's negotiating leverage to take action now, and put the President under much greater pressure.

That is logical thinking, but it does not take account of the mistrust in Hanoi. There, it appears, the prisoners are seen as protection against an American re-escalation of the war. If the card is given up, the Communist side fears, the United States might feel more free to go on bombing indefinitely all over Indochina, including North Vietnam.

Mistrust and misunderstanding are also factors in Washington. President Nixon knows that the Communists returned French prisoners after France settled at the Geneva conference in 1954 and withdrew her forces, yet he continues to tell the American public that the only way to get our prisoners out is to refuse to fix a time for final withdrawal—the reverse of logic.

And so the prisoner issue remains in its paradoxical position: We refuse to set a date for total withdrawal until they make a commitment to release the prisoners; they refuse to make any commitments until we set a date.

Because of such a difference, men have to go on killing and being killed, brutalizing themselves and others for no convincing cause. Is it possible? How will it look to history? Against the fact of mistrust, one feels the hope of sanity.

One side or the other may still change its tactics and make a gesture of faith. Xuan Thuy may get fresh instructions and at some point this summer offer a commitment on the prisoners. Or President Nixon may find reason to change his policy of open-ended war.