

# Illogic in Vietnam

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, May 24—An interview with Xuan Thuy, North Vietnam's chief negotiator in Paris, by Anthony Lewis of The New York Times, has made plain the essential illogic of President Nixon's stand on the so-called "P.O.W. issue."

In fact, as Eugene McCarthy pointed out in a weekend speech at a peace rally in Minneapolis, the policy of "Vietnamization" itself appears illogical if it is really Mr. Nixon's aim to insure South Vietnam "a chance" for self-determination.

The President has insisted that he will not set a date for the complete withdrawal of American forces from Indochina until Hanoi promises more than a mere discussion of the prisoner issue. "We need action on their part and a commitment on their part with regard to the prisoners," he said on April 28.

But what is the threat, if any, which makes this stand credible? Mr. Nixon also has said that all American troops will not leave South Vietnam—a "residual force" of unspecified size will remain—until the prisoners are released. But a residual force certainly cannot effect the release of the prisoners if the larger force of this year or last year could not do so.

Thus, Mr. Nixon's stand not only can do nothing to effect the release of the prisoners; it is also an explicit admission that the policy of unilateral withdrawal cannot be a policy of total withdrawal but one of withdrawal to some point to be determined by Mr. Nixon. On that basis, if we are to keep some troops in South Vietnam until the prisoners are released, we may keep both troops and prisoners there forever.

All of that, Mr. Thuy told Mr. Lewis, merely confirms the suspicion of Hanoi that Mr. Nixon does not intend a total withdrawal, but plans to keep enough American force in Indochina to guarantee the survival of a non-Communist South Vietnamese regime—a so-called "Korean solution."

It may well be that Mr. Nixon is correct that "a promise to discuss means nothing from the North Vietnamese." Even so, if he is determined to stick with his withdrawal policy, it is difficult to see what could be lost by extensive secret discussions, in Paris and elsewhere, to see if there could not be developed an understanding, tacit or explicit, that Washington and Hanoi would announce simultaneously (a) a date for the completion of

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the American withdrawal, and (b) that on the same date or sooner the P.O.W.'s would be released, probably in several installments.

This would not only remove the necessity for the residual force, which would be a certain point of political controversy in this country and elsewhere; it would also at a stroke deprive all the potential Democratic Presidential nominees (save Senator Henry Jackson) of their chosen position on Vietnam.

Mr. McCarthy is another matter. He hinted strongly that he is thinking more nearly in terms of a third-party candidacy than of another run within the Democratic party. And in addition, he set himself apart from the Democratic aspirants by advocating a negotiated settlement rather than a unilateral American withdrawal by a certain date.

Mr. McCarthy pointed to the inescapable but often obscured fact that there is little chance the United States can have more influence than it now has on the future of Indochina after it has pulled out all its forces (either at Mr. Nixon's order or under Congressional mandate). But to negotiate now, while there is some rough equilibrium of forces and with the lure of cutting short a war costly to all sides, might produce more acceptable arrangements than withdrawal or the "Korean solution." It might even get the prisoners home more swiftly.

Mr. Thuy lent credence to this view when he expressed to Mr. Lewis that because of the failure of Mr. Nixon's efforts to win a "military victory" through escalation in Cambodia and Laos, the North Vietnamese now have only to wait for the fruits of an inevitable victory of their own.

If that represents Hanoi's attitude, it will not be possible to negotiate any kind of an Indochinese settlement without substantial concessions from Washington and Saigon—presumably the acceptance of an interim arrangement for sharing political power in South Vietnam among all contending elements until a longer-term arrangement can be reached by the parties themselves.

It is true that that might open the door to a Communist take-over at some point in the future. But withdrawing all American troops will far more surely open that door, and prolong a sad, destructive, pointless war by how many years no one can say.