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## Communists manipulate opinion on issue of prisoner exchange

WASHINGTON — The skill and audacity with which the Vietnamese Communists manipulate American public opinion on the emotion-charged prisoner-of-war issue is illustrated by a diplomatic cable transmitted back to Hanoi June 11 by the North Vietnamese negotiating team in Paris.

That cable contained the official Communist transcript of an interview in Paris three days earlier between Xuan Thuy, chief North Vietnamese negotiator, and Chalmers M. Roberts of the Washington Post. The transcript quoted Xuan Thuy as saying that "if the United States sets a reasonable deadline for the complete withdrawal of troops, we could discuss the settlement of the prisoner of war question"—precisely the Hanoi line.

In truth, however, that is not what the Communist negotiator said at all. Roberts, a respected diplomatic correspondent, reported Xuan Thuy as telling him, "If a reasonable date is set, the question of prisoners may be settled." In response to another question, he amended that to "will be settled."

The discrepancy reveals the POW game played by the Hanoi politburo. The soft line actually given in the interview with Roberts is intended to convince Americans that the POWs will come home just as soon as President Nixon sets a troop withdrawal deadline. The altered transcript cabled to Hanoi reiterated the hard line that is the Vietnamese reality: Hanoi promises nothing whatever in return for a troop withdrawal deadline.

This audacious game has worked, feeding demands in the United States for quick withdrawal. Two antiwar Democrats, Sen. Vance Hartke of Indiana and Rep. Robert Leggett of California, returned from talks with the Communists in Paris indicating that the Americans were to blame for the negotiations deadlock. Clark Clifford, former secretary of defense, has predicted release of the prisoners 30 days after agreement to withdraw. In a climate further soured by the Pentagon papers, many Americans believe the worst of their own country's

leaders while exercising complete gullibility about Communist promises.

The basic position is point one of the South Vietnamese Communist eight-point "elaboration" of last Sept. 7. It not only links prisoner releases with a fixed date for U.S. troop withdrawals but also talks about taking all U.S. weapons and war materials from South Vietnamese troops and dismantling U.S. bases in Vietnam. Thus, the troop withdrawal deadline accomplishes nothing.

Consistently, the official Communist line in Paris has been that such a deadline set by Mr. Nixon would win him merely the right to discuss prisoner releases. Mme. Nguyen Thi Binh, chief South Vietnamese Communist negotiator, deviated from this only once. On April 15, an article by her in the French newspaper *Le Monde* suggested that Mr. Nixon need only fix a deadline "for GIs and American prisoners to be rapidly and safely returned."

But on the very day that article appeared, Mme. Binh was her usual intractable self at the negotiations session. Prisoners would return home, she said, only after the war had "come to an end"—that is, after a political settlement along Communist lines.

Rep. Leggett's visit to Paris on May 31 again showed the two faces. Nguyen Van Tien, Mme. Binh's deputy, told the Congressman that POWs could be released as soon as Mr. Nixon set a "reasonable date" for withdrawal. But when reporters queried Communist spokesmen about Leggett's visit, they were told repatriation of prisoners would be merely discussed once the withdrawal of troops was announced.

The pattern is unmistakable. The ransom for American POWs will be much dearer than the Democratic-sponsored troop withdrawal deadline. To get them home, the U.S. must agree to humiliating concessions ending with a Communist regime in Saigon. Such is the iron realpolitik behind the Oriental smiles exhibited in Paris for American politicians.

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