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The Peace Proposal Dilemma

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The latest Viet Cong peace proposal has posed a painful choice for the Nixon administration — between getting the United States prisoners out and keeping the Thieu government in.

U.S. officials are studyin

the Communist plan in an effort to find areas of negotiation getting around the dilemma. There is clearly a genuine desire here to breathe life into the Paris talks. Equally clear is a desire to mollify resurgent anti-war sentiment in congress and in the country.

The spokesman for the Viet Cong's Provisional Revolu-

tionary Government, Duong Dinh Thao, said during a press conference in Paris Thursday, "The question that arises is whether Mr. Nixon is prepared to renounce his support of the warmongering Nguyen Van Thieu group now in power in Saigon."

Yesterday, Hanoi radio picked up that theme, quot-

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ing Senator George McGovern (Dem.-S.D.), who said that now that the Communists have agreed to release prisoners if the United States sets a withdrawal date, "not one further American death can be . . . justified in the name of the release of U.S. prisoners."

McGovern said, "Every American Casualty from this day forward . . . is suffered in the defense of Generals (Nguyen Van) Thieu and (Nguyen Coa) Ky and for no other reason."

American officials here were asking their own questions. They will probably be brought to the Paris peace table in an effort to get some give-and-take into the negotiations.

QUESTIONS

What, precisely, they ask, do the communists mean by "withdrawal?" Do they demand the end of all economic and military support for Saigon? What do they mean when they call for an end to

"Vietnamization?"

The U.S. spokesman at the Paris talks said Thursday, "Their definition of withdrawal may include the requirement that we go to the point that will cause the collapse of the South Vietnamese government."

The seven points also speak of the release of civilian war prisoners, apparently meaning political prisoners. "One man's political prisoner is another man's terrorist," the spokesman noted.

Perhaps the most important question being asked here is whether the Communists are finally prepared, as they broadly hint, to separate the U.S. withdrawal and prisoner issues from a solution to the South Vietnamese internal political situation.

Before leaving on a two-week tour of the Far East, Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird indicated that total withdrawal of U.S. troops

from Vietnam could be accomplished by the end of the year. But he said that billions of dollars worth of military equipment might have to be left behind if such a hasty pullout schedule were adopted.

Obstacles

Laird, whose trip will take him to Japan and Korea but not to Vietnam, was asked at an airport news conference whether any serious physical obstacles would prevent the U.S. from withdrawing all its troops within six months, as the Communists suggested.

Terming that a "very hypothetical question," Laird said only that "personnel can be handled of course, in a short time."

But he said the job of getting the vast amount of equipment back home — a subject not dealt with in the Communist plan — was far more difficult. If this material was not returned, he said, the administration "would certainly have to go to Congress for many billions of dollars of appropriations" to buy new equipment.

Laird said the Communist proposals reflected "some change" but still set "some difficult conditions" for a peace settlement.

