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Opening in Paris?

The Communist offer to release all prisoners of war if the United States agrees to withdraw its forces from Vietnam by the end of this year may open the way to a breakthrough at the Paris peace talks.

Only last month, President Nixon reiterated at a news conference: "It always comes back to the same thing. If we end our involvement in Vietnam and set a date, they will agree to discuss prisoners—not to release them." The Communist negotiators have now met that fundamental objection.

The proposals introduced by the Vietcong delegate yesterday in Paris, and endorsed by the North Vietnamese delegation, appear to parallel closely a plan suggested by Senator Mansfield. This plan, which has been adopted by the Senate as an amendment to the Selective Service Act, calls on the President to establish a final date for withdrawal of American forces from Indochina within nine months, for negotiation of an immediate cease-fire by all parties to the Indochina hostilities and for a series of phased and rapid withdrawals of United States military forces in exchange for a corresponding series of phased releases of prisoners of war. The Communist proposals also call for phased withdrawal and prisoner release and for a cease-fire with the withdrawal of American forces.

Obviously the Communist plan will require careful study and extensive probing. It contains potentially obstructive conditions, such as the demand for a prior political settlement in Saigon and insistence that the United States "must accept full responsibility for losses and destruction it has caused to the Vietnamese people in the two zones."

But the offer to free the prisoners and establish a cease-fire does represent a major forward shift in Communist policy that the United States Government cannot afford to ignore. If the other conditions do not prove to be too rigid, it should be possible now for the President to negotiate terms for withdrawal that will enjoy the support of a majority of the American people and their Representatives in Congress. This is an opportunity that should be seized promptly, before the existing policy of unilateral withdrawals further weakens the American negotiating position.