

## U.S. Officials Voice Cautious Skepticism On Vietcong's Offer

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WASHINGTON, July 2—The Nixon Administration assumed an attitude of cautious skepticism today toward the latest Vietcong proposal for a settlement of the Vietnam war.

Senior officials emphasized in private conversations that it was too soon to tell whether the seven-point proposal outlined at the Paris peace talks yesterday might form the basis for substantive negotiations to end the war.

"We are there for serious negotiations," one important official said of the three-year-old Paris talks. "But we are not going to be deluded into euphoria by the set of circumstances that exists at this time."

[The French Foreign Minister, Maurice Schumann, described the Vietcong proposal as "a new and important step toward a political solution of the problem," Reuters reported from Paris. He made the remark before meeting Mrs. Nguyen Thi Binh, the head of the Vietcong delegation, to discuss the plan.]

In Dallas, Senator Edmund S. Muskie of Maine told a group of newspaper editors that the Communist proposal was the best offer yet to end the war. Senator Muskie was making a political appearance as part of his unan-

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nounced campaign for the Democratic Presidential nomination.

At the White House, where the proposal was characterized yesterday as a combination of "positive, as well as clearly unacceptable, elements," Ronald L. Zeigler, the press secretary, declined to revise that assessment.

Administration officials said there was "obscure language that is not totally clear" in the Vietcong proposal. They said it was likely the United States delegation would seek clarification at the next session of the peace talks on Thursday.

One thing the delegation reportedly will press for is a more specific explanation of the Communist proposal for simultaneous United States troop withdrawals and repatriation of American prisoners.

Some diplomatic strategists expressed concern that the Vietcong offer was intended to put the United States on the defensive politically, rather than to build a foundation for serious bargaining.

These officials said that in appearing to agree to previous United States insistence on release of the prisoners as a condition of any settlement, the Communists had, in effect, forced the Administration to treat the proposal as a serious one whether or not the offer was sincere.

These officials suggested that the White House could not afford to risk re-igniting Congressional debate on end-the-war legislation or take the chance of losing the goodwill of the prisoners' families by rejecting the proposal out of hand.

At the same time, the Administration continued to weigh the possibility that the plan was a genuine step toward more fruitful negotiations.

Mr. Ziegler did not discount the comments of Congressional leaders that President Nixon had undertaken some secret diplomatic efforts. He said, rather, that he could not discuss such statements by individuals including the House Speaker, Carl Albert, and the Senate Democratic leader, Mike Mansfield.

Melvin R. Laird, the Secretary of Defense, said as he left Washington for a diplomatic trip to Japan and South Korea that it was possible to withdraw all United States troops from Vietnam by the end of the year, as the Vietcong proposed.

But Mr. Laird said that it would not be possible within six months to pull out the large quantities of equipment and

supplies that are essential to the withdrawing forces.

"You would certainly have to go to the Congress for many billions of dollars of appropriations" to resupply the military if the material had to be abandoned, he said.

W. Averell Harriman, a former head of the United States delegation at the Paris talks, said on the C.B.S. morning news that the proposal would bring about the return of American prisoners as the Nixon Administration had been seeking.