

Light in the East?

By ANTHONY LEWIS

PARIS — "The only practical American interest remaining in these negotiations is to get out with a degree of honor. This is probably the last chance to do it."

The comment came from a man deeply familiar with the course of the Vietnam peace talks and therefore without optimistic illusions. He saw that hope—that limited hope—in the new Communist peace offer and the gloss put on it by North Vietnam's ranking figure here, Le Duc Tho.

For three weary years through 120 stagey meetings, the negotiators have failed to resolve any issue of substance. They have never really got down to negotiating. Why should the situation be different now?

The answer is that until now the issue on the table has been one on which neither side was genuinely prepared to bargain: the political future of South Vietnam. Successive American Administrations have been committed to preserve the Government in Saigon, the Communists to destroy it.

But the talks could focus now on a question less profound and therefore more likely to be within the reach of negotiation. That is the Communist proposal for American withdrawal by a fixed date and the simultaneous release of prisoners—both without any prior political understanding.

In discussing that proposal separately, as an interview with Le Duc Tho made clear he envisaged, each side would have an urgent interest and a reason to bargain: the United States to get its prisoners out, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese to be assured of an early and total American withdrawal.

Le Duc Tho gave an impression of considerable flexibility. He indicated that the Communist timetable for withdrawal, by the end of 1971, was negotiable. He left open the possibility that American military aid to Saigon could continue. He said for the first time that, after an American exit, the Communist side would negotiate with the Saigon administration—so long as it was not headed by President Nguyen Van Thieu.

Many difficulties are still seen by American diplomats in the new proposal. It could be read as requiring an unacceptably sudden end to U.S. support of the South Vietnamese Army. It could exclude from the prisoner exchange Americans captured in Laos and Cambodia, and require the inclusion of civilian "revolutionaries" held in Saigon jails.

Those are legitimate concerns. The question is whether President Nixon will let them cloud the whole proposal with suspicion and therefore raise obstacles to negotiation, or whether he will treat it hopefully and seriously.

Some students of Mr. Nixon believe he will now revert to an old theme not mentioned lately: the demand for

AT HOME ABROAD

"mutual withdrawal" of both Vietnamese and American forces from South Vietnam. That would effectively indicate a decision not to negotiate.

To take up the Communist proposal seriously, the President would probably have to announce a decision in principle to set a final withdrawal date—the step he has so far refused to take. Then he could test, in negotiations, Le Duc Tho's statement that after that decision the details of withdrawal and prisoner exchange could be "rapidly settled."

Mr. Nixon will have to choose his course quite swiftly, for he is under severe time pressure on the prisoner issue. The American public demand to "get the boys home by Christmas" is so strong that some think the President will in any case have to announce a final date when he makes his next scheduled troop withdrawal statement in November, if there has been no negotiated agreement by then.

A November announcement may be too late to bring the desired response—early release of all the prisoners. The Communists want the decision to come this summer, evidently hoping that it will swing the October presidential election in South Vietnam away from General Thieu and toward a candidate with whom they could negotiate.

Here we approach the question of American honor. The Communists, as Le Duc Tho said, would like the United States to arrange that General Thieu lose the election. Most Americans would regard open intervention to that end as improper. We would be repeating our past mistake of playing God in South Vietnam.

But it does not follow that the United States will be honorably neutral in South Vietnamese politics if it stands pat on its present policy this summer. As Charles Yost pointed out recently in *The New York Times*, the refusal to set a final withdrawal date gives an impression of endless American military involvement that works for the war candidate, General Thieu.

Even *The Economist* of London, which has taken a persistently hawkish view, this week sees advantages in the election of a Saigon President who could deal with the Communists. Mr. Nixon himself could soon come to regret a policy that helped to re-elect General Thieu. For in 1972 the political pressure to do something about the prisoners may become unbearable. And eventually the something could be the step we now eschew: forcing out the man who is the obstacle to a settlement, General Thieu.

If he thinks into that distance, President Nixon may see that prudence and honor both counsel an attempt to seize this last chance in Paris.