

# Fooling 'All the People'

By C. L. SULZBERGER

PARIS—Communist strategy in this final phase of the Indochina war seems postulated on proving Abraham Lincoln was wrong; and that it is indeed possible to fool all the American people all the time. Hanoi has reason to believe it may well demonstrate this cynical theorem's accuracy.

Emphasis of the conflict has shifted from the battlefields of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia to Paris where, although formal peace talks remain stalemated, cubic yards of propaganda are being released. After a year's absence, Le Duc Tho, number five in the North Vietnamese pecking order, returned here to join Mrs. Binh, the Vietcong negotiator, in mounting a diplomatic offensive.

It doesn't require second sight to see that Hanoi is convinced a growing majority of Americans opposes any Nixon policy that isn't tantamount to cut and run from Indochina and that the respect and esteem for the U.S. Government on war policy flicker close to zero.

Communist officials have therefore eagerly made themselves available to the foreign press to explain that if only the United States will be reasonable, settlement can swiftly be arranged on the basis of an announced fixed date for an American military withdrawal under promised safeguards and a release of prisoners from Vietnam; Laos and Cambodia haven't yet been mentioned.

It is asserted that no conditions are attached, that if only Nguyen Van Thieu will be replaced in Saigon as president, North and South Vietnam can arrange a settlement between them as separate neutral partners. Le Duc Tho went so far as to tell a French magazine this week that Hanoi will eschew all alliances and refuse military bases to any foreign countries (such as China or Russia).

This seems heartening. It promises a negotiable way out of an unpopular war—until one carefully rereads the very first point of the new negotiating position outlined by Mrs. Binh on July 1. This includes the following categorical demand:

"The U.S. Government must put an end to its war of aggression in Vietnam, the policy of 'Vietnamization' of the war, withdraw from South Vietnam all troops, military personnel,

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weapon and war materials of the United States and of other foreign countries in the U.S. camp, and dismantle all U.S. bases in South Vietnam, *without posing any condition whatsoever* (my italics).

This very first point means that, beneath the bland smile of Indochina Communist negotiators here, they insist that we sign an unconditional surrender before we even begin to discuss subsequent terms. The approach clearly excuses the Communist side from incorporating in any written agreement unilateral promises they have been making in public. Is it an ultimatum to sign a blank check?

Hanoi hopes to emulate the kind of operation Algeria's National Liberation Front succeeded in arranging with de Gaulle. Although French forces reigned supreme on all battlefields, de Gaulle was forced to capitulate diplomatically because there was no longer sufficient support in France's public opinion for any other course and the general was wise enough to know this. Even so, he was able to negotiate a compromise basis for withdrawal.

American public opinion has crumbled so rapidly and the leadership position of the Government has therefore been weakened so perceptibly by a mass tendency toward self-flagellation that Hanoi adjudges the time has come to demand a winner-take-all settlement. The Communists haven't won the battlefield conflict but they have won the public opinion contest in the U.S.A.

Therefore, more resolutely than ever, they want to extrude American forces, cancel American aid commitments, isolate South Vietnam from Washington and force the United States first to change Saigon's government. And they want to seal the arrangement by precluding us from "*posing any condition whatsoever*" in negotiations.

Never before has the United States appeared so nakedly helpless. In World War I 337,649 American men were classified as draft dodgers. That figure is startling but this time, as Hanoi understands, the whole U.S.A. wants to dodge an even more unpopular draft, leaving us helpless even to negotiate.