

## Vietnam: Nixon's Way Out

When Richard Nixon summoned newsmen to the White House press room late last week for his long-awaited Vietnam announcement, almost none of them knew what to expect. Still stunned by the President's earlier bombshells on China and the economy, some reporters speculated that Mr. Nixon was about to drop "the third shoe"—perhaps by revealing a plan for a total American pull-out from Vietnam. True to form, the President did, in fact, surprise everyone once again—but this time with the news that there was no big surprise after all. In quiet, assured tones, Mr. Nixon outlined a stepped-up, short-term schedule of troop withdrawals—a move that, on reflection, seemed to leave the President with a considerable amount of flexibility as he delicately backs out of Indochina.

In a sense, the Nixon announcement fitted smoothly into the Administration's two-year-old game plan for winding down the war. Over the next two months, 45,000 American soldiers will be brought home from Vietnam—with more than half that number scheduled to be back in the States by Christmas. By Feb. 1, the President noted, total U.S. troop strength will have dropped to some 139,000 men—more than 400,000 fewer than when he took office. But Mr. Nixon refused, as his critics have urged, to set a "date certain" for a total American withdrawal. Instead, he linked further pullouts to the level of Communist infiltration and progress on the release of U.S. prisoners of war. And although he reminded his countrymen that the U.S. had "already concluded" its offensive combat role in Vietnam, he also served notice that re-

sidual U.S. ground forces and U.S. air power would be employed to give Washington added "negotiating leverage" at the bargaining table.

As the President spoke, he exuded confidence, conveying the impression of a man still riding high from his earlier foreign-policy coups. He had kept his secret so well that only a handful of his closest aides—including national-security adviser Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State William Rogers and Defense Secretary Melvin Laird—knew what he was going to say, and he did not even bother briefing Republican leaders on Capitol Hill. At the news conference itself, Mr. Nixon fielded even the most heavily barbed questions with aplomb. Asked about his 1968 campaign pledge to "end the war"—not just the U.S. involvement—the President cited his record of promises kept and advised newsmen to withhold judgment until next year's campaign.

**Arsenal:** Mr. Nixon's self-assurance was not unfounded. Despite his public commitment to withdrawal from Indochina, he still appeared to have a striking array of bargaining counters—so many, in fact, that he could still reasonably cherish the hope of persuading Hanoi to negotiate a settlement. For one thing, a U.S. residual force of 30,000 to 40,000 GI's stationed indefinitely on South Vietnamese soil would probably serve as a psychological buttress for the regime of President Nguyen Van Thieu. For another, the impressive arsenal of U.S. air power in Southeast Asia appeared—for the moment at least—to guarantee that the South Vietnamese Army would not be overrun on the battlefield. Even more significant,



GI's 'stand down' in Vietnam: Winding down without an upheaval

## NATIONAL AFFAIRS

the President was clearly hoping that, during his forthcoming trips to China and the Soviet Union, he might inveigle Hanoi's Communist patrons into throwing their weight behind an Indochina peace conference.

Not everyone, of course, shared Mr. Nixon's hope that he could orchestrate a Vietnam settlement quite that easily. Indeed, in the eyes of critics, the Administration's plan was based on a serious underestimation of Hanoi's determination to accept nothing less than total victory in South Vietnam. In addition, the critics contended that, although U.S. air power might be able to prevent the Saigon regime from being crushed by the north, the U.S. could do little if the Thieu government was ousted by a popular coalition more sympathetic to Hanoi. And even many detached observers doubted that Moscow and Peking had any interest in nudging Hanoi toward a settlement. Why, they reasoned, should the Communist superpowers bail the U.S. out of the most ill-fated foreign involvement in its history?

**Violence:** Other critics saw another major flaw in the Nixonian scenario. The successful completion of the U.S. strategic withdrawal, they argued, was no guarantee that three or four years from now a non-Communist government would still be in power in Saigon. In more immediate terms, there was a small body of opinion that was increasingly disturbed by the kind of war America was leaving behind. According to a Cornell University study published last week, the U.S. will have dropped as many bombs on Indochina in 1971 as were dropped during the entire second world war. On the ground, too, the war has recently been marked by a greater level of violence; in the last few weeks, South Vietnamese Army deaths have been averaging 350 per week—which is slightly higher than the average number of Americans killed each week at the height of the U.S. involvement.

One of the things the Administration's Vietnamization program has accomplished, in other words, is to change the pigmentation of the casualties. But few Americans seemed to be troubled by the moral issue posed by that fact. As a result, Richard Nixon may have solved the political dilemma that he inherited with Vietnam. For the moment, at any rate, he seems to be well on the way toward achieving what many had once thought was impossible—wrapping up the war in a way that will satisfy the voters and avoid an immediate diplomatic disaster for the U.S.

## DEMOCRATS:

### Exit Harris

Fred Harris's fall campaign was one of the curiosities of the early Democratic Presidential sweepstakes. The Oklahoma liberal got into the big race only after deciding to let his U.S. Senate seat lapse

rather than run an underdog race for re-election. He had a theme ("The new populism"), a quarter-million-dollar bankroll, boundless energy—but no discernible support. He lasted six weeks.

At a midweek Washington news conference, Harris called it quits. The new populist had run up against some intractable old economics. "I am broke," he announced. He had spent his stake, run up an additional \$40,000 debt and—with his campaign striking no sparks—had only a trickle of fresh contributions coming in. Harris thus joined Senators Harold Hughes, Birch Bayh and William Proxmire among the Democratic Presidential dropouts. But he was so deep in the pack of also-rans that his departure from the field is unlikely to affect the fortunes of the real contenders.

■ While Harris was pulling out, Democrat-come-lately John Lindsay took another step toward making his candidacy official. At a City Hall news conference in New York, Lindsay announced that Deputy Mayor Richard Aurelio, his chief political adviser, was resigning "to explore the national situation" in his behalf. For starters, Aurelio will plot primary scenarios for Florida, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Indiana.

## Turnabout

For all his energetic efforts to nail down the Democratic Presidential nomination, most of the recent news has sounded discouraging for Maine's Sen. Edmund Muskie. But last week, the Gallup poll reported that Muskie has moved out to an impressive 50 per cent to 39 per cent lead over Sen. Edward Kennedy as the choice of Democratic voters for the nomination. The figures represent a dramatic turnabout since last March, when Kennedy led Muskie 46 per cent to 43 per cent. Muskie also holds an 11-point advantage over Hubert Humphrey. And in a match-up with John Lindsay, Muskie leads by a whopping 58 per cent to 25 per cent.



Harris, wife LaDonna: 'I am broke'