

Putting the Lie to Peace on Earth

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

It being the day before Christmas and the men of the national administration being who they are, we will shortly see their long faces and heavenward eyes on the tube. Their mouths will be in a simulacrum of prayer as they imprecate the Christian deity to work on the hearts of backslid Buddhists of Hanoi to release our prisoners of war.

The Godhead, like the American public, will be told that our representatives, men of good will all and all seeking peace on earth, have sat through three years of obtuse, obdurate and obstinate behavior by the other side at the Paris talks; He will be told that we have been the refinement of reason, flexibility and polite candor. He will not be told the bombers are still off and winging, and that the number of American airmen in North Vietnam continues to grow as it has for so long a time.

God, even on His birthday, can be supposed to have adequate sources of information, but the rest of us may not. We may have been led to believe that the Paris talks consist of the other side relieving themselves of Gromyko-like discharges of vituperation while our man sits uttering polite words of compromise.

That's not exactly the case. Our diplomatic representative in Paris, Ambassador William J. Porter, also has the manners of a commissioner. A few excerpts from the text of statements to the other side the past month or so will illustrate:

"We find your performance here lamentable and your authority to answer the simplest questions apparently non-existent . . . You spoke of your "goodwill." This pose was short-lived . . . There is nothing new in your statements today. You are using the same stale material I have heard since my arrival here . . . Your various 'points' now add up to 37, but their importance to date is zero because you are not permitted to explain or defend them, and it is and will remain beyond your power to impose them * . . . I suggest that you leave the realm of fantasy and return to practical reality. If you have done anything affirmative here in Paris, I am not aware of it . . . In view of your record here in these meetings, you should congratulate yourselves that we are still here listening. The best advice I can give you is that you discard your agitprop technique . . ."

This is the language of diplomacy, the style of speech of one who seeks to come to an agreement? Hardly, but then the POW's will spend Christmas in the stockades because the President wants them there, needs them there to excuse sending more bombers and that will send more Americans to join those already captive. It's also a minor blessing for H. Ross Perot, the free-enterprise prodigy who made his millions selling computer software services to government welfare agencies. Mr. Perot is rumored to be thinking of running for the Senate from Texas, mostly on his reputation of having failed to get the POW's released but having failed sincerely and theatrically.

In point of fact, on July 1 the North Vietnamese made a peace proposal which included the release of our men by a fixed date. Ambassador Porter has yet to respond to it. The reason given is that their proposals were too ambiguous.

"If they propose something specific, we condemn them for being rigid; if they're not specific, we condemn them for being ambiguous," Rep. Robert Leggett, a Cali-

ifornia Democrat, recently observed in a letter to Secretary of State Rogers. Leggett has been to Paris and talked with the other side and is convinced we can have our men and peace any time we want it. It's his thinking that Porter's bargaining position is a non-negotiable demand for unconditional surrender in order to prolong the war and that in pursuit of this objective absolutely no effort is being made to find out if there is a common ground on which to arrange a ceasefire.

In the same letter to Rogers, Leggett wrote, "The other side's first offer to actually release the prisoners came on May 31; when in private conversation I asked Nguyen Van Tien if he would release all the POW's in return for a withdrawal date. He said he would, and Mrs. Binh repeated the offer at the official negotiating table a month later. I certainly do not think it was any act of genius on my part which enabled me to extract a concession your department had been unable to get in three years of negotiating. On the contrary, I was successful merely because I asked the direct, specific and obvious question your negotiators had never

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asked. So I suggest that further use of direct specific questions might well lead to further progress."

It might well have, but it's too late for this year, too late for this Christmas. The men must languish there while their families make holiday the best they can. Imagine how they feel. Barbara Mullen, the wife of Marine Maj. William F. Mullen, shot down over Laos in April, 1966, has tried to describe it. The resulting "Christmas Poem" isn't great verse, but the first purpose of poetry is to tell another person how you feel and this Mrs. Mullen certainly does:

*Christmas is sad and lonely and tears
When he's been gone for so many years.
Men who went to war not asking why
Are left alone in cells to die
And think of a son who was two, now nine
Ask God, the woman I loved, is she still mine?
Christmas is cruel and lonely and tears
And he'll be away for many more years
Turn to economics, forget all the killing.
If the level of deaths has been lowered, we're
willing,
Talk of brotherhood and kindness and cheer
Tell all your friends it's been a good year.
Peace on earth is a lie and death is sadness
They'll never be back, for mankind is madness.*

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