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# Buying Time in the Vietnam War

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 3—President Nixon has now offered the outline of his plans for a fourth year of withdrawals from Vietnam, still leaving the end in doubt because he is buying time to strengthen Saigon's forces and to improve the anti-Communist positions in Laos and Cambodia.

Mr. Nixon intimated clearly that South Vietnam was not yet secure enough to offer an early deadline for total American withdrawal in exchange for American prisoners. But he said Hanoi "will have a chance to answer" such a proposition "when we come down to the end, as far as our own involvement in Vietnam is concerned."

That implied a firm offer next summer, or later, to pull out all American troops and to stop all air activity in Indochina in return for the release of the prisoners. The effective date of the deal, even if accepted promptly, would thus be later this year at the earliest. It is a scenario that allows at least nine more months, and perhaps a much longer time, for periodic bombings of North Vietnam and heavy air support for allied forces in the rest of Indochina.

That much is fairly clear in the President's extended discussion of Vietnam in a television interview last night with Dan Rather of the Columbia System. Mr. Nixon was pressed to be more precise about his frequent pledge, first, "to end the war" or, more recently, "to end American involvement in the war" during his first term.

He replied that he could not guarantee the end of all involvement because he would never pull out altogether while Americans remained prisoners of war in North Vietnam. But he indicated that the American ground forces would be reduced to no more than 35,000 by summer and that casualties among them and among the still-active Air Force would be minimal. He expressed confidence that this

## Nixon Leaves End in Doubt as He Tries to Bolster Allies

would be enough to satisfy the American electorate that he had done everything possible in dealing "with international outlaws" in Hanoi.

Other facets of the President's discussion were more vague or ambiguous. His comments evoked a charge today from Senator George McGovern that instead of seeking the immediate release of the prisoners in return for withdrawal, Mr. Nixon was actually delaying their release to delay disengagement.

Mr. McGovern, a South Dakotan who is seeking the Democratic nomination for the Presidency, figured in Mr. Nixon's discussion of the diplomacy surrounding Vietnam. The public record of that diplomacy and independent investigation in recent weeks suggest that both men have some basis for their conflicting statements.

The confusion dated from July 1, when the Vietcong offered in Paris to arrange for the release of American prisoners provided the United States set a date for total withdrawal of foreign forces in 1971. They defined withdrawal as involving not only the cessation of ground and air attacks but also the removal of all weapons and war materials and the dismantling of all bases. The second of the seven points in the proposal called for the withdrawal of political support from the Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu and, perhaps, help in installing a new coalition regime.

In a series of subsequent interviews, including one with Senator McGovern, the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese implied or were thought to imply that their first point — withdrawal in exchange for prisoners—could be dealt with separately. President Nixon, who in the meantime had diverted attention to his planned

journey to Peking, said the offer was being explored privately, but nothing came of it.

The Nixon Administration, in its own deliberations, was clearly not prepared to withdraw in 1971 under any circumstances. It appeared reluctant even to negotiate for a later date until it had better evidence that the Thieu Government and its forces could survive a withdrawal. It suspected in any case that the withdrawal of troops and even air power would not suffice and that the prisoners would remain hostages until all military and political aid to Saigon had ceased. Such aid is contemplated for the indefinite future.

Last fall, Hanoi's spokesmen stiffened their posture again by indicating that their proposal was not separable into military and political segments. That is what that Mr. Nixon presumably alluded to last night when he said that a straight swap—withdrawal for prisoners—had been publicly rejected.

Senator McGovern counters with the observation that a truly total withdrawal of military aid to Saigon would satisfy Hanoi's demand for the end of political support and that a deal remains possible. That is the basis of his statement that the President is using the prisoners as a pretext to avoid withdrawal.

It has been established by reporters in Saigon that the debate among leading Americans there in recent months has dealt not with whether to leave a residual force, plus air power in the war zone next summer but only with the size of the force. Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, the American commander, and others were said to be asking for at least 60,000 men on the ground.

There have been indications here and in Paris that the Administration is not ready to relinquish its power in Indochina. Indeed, American negotiators have wondered why the North Vietnamese have not played on American feelings by offering an unambiguous exchange of prisoners for ground and air withdrawal.