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## Hostages in Hanoi...

President Nixon either signaled a significant shift in his Vietnam policy or he misled the American people when he told a TV interviewer night before last that a complete cessation of American military involvement in Indochina "depends on one circumstance"; i.e., the prisoner-of-war situation.

The President suggested that his sole reason for retaining a residual force in Vietnam and the threat of additional air strikes against the North was the plight of the prisoners. He indicated that Hanoi had rejected an American proposal to set a withdrawal date in return for release of the prisoners and a guarantee of safety for departing American troops. His statement is at variance with the public record so far.

Last July, after the President had indicated that his primary concerns were the safety of the troops and freedom for the prisoners, the Communists offered a seven-point peace plan in Paris that appeared to meet these stipulations. Communist spokesmen at first suggested, and then denied, that the troop withdrawal-prisoner release elements of their proposal could be separated from its political requirements. But there is no public evidence that the Administration has responded to the Vietcong presentation with counterproposals, of its own along the lines indicated by Mr. Nixon.

Instead the President resurrected and reiterated a third condition for withdrawal—preservation of the present regime in Saigon. Only a few weeks ago (in November), Mr. Nixon declared that American air power would continue to support South Vietnamese combat forces "until there is a negotiated settlement or . . . until the South Vietnamese have developed the capability to handle the situation themselves."

Since President Thieu is unwilling to make the concessions necessary for a political settlement and seems unable to stand on his own, the United States under President Nixon's policies has remained trapped in a circular commitment. The prisoners have been made an excuse for the residual troops, whose safety is cited in turn as justification for the bombing raids, which promptly produced more prisoners.

If the President has finally decided to abandon this futile pursuit of military victory, if the plight of the prisoners is really the "one circumstance" now standing in the way of total withdrawal, Mr. Nixon should waste no time in replying positively at last to the Communist initiative of last summer in Paris. Otherwise, it will be difficult to avoid the conclusion that the prisoners of war are not only captives of Hanoi but hostages to the policies and political fortunes of Presidents Thieu and Nixon.