



Nixon's Hole Card On the Vietnam War

Joseph Kraft

IN HIS INTERVIEW with Dan Rather of CBS Sunday night, President Nixon gave the world a peek at his hole card on Vietnam and it turns out to be a far better card than most of us anticipated.

But will it be good enough for the other side? There are strong reasons to doubt the North Vietnamese are going to take the offer that is apparently being served up to them for 1972.

The makings of an offer are implicit in a question which the President asked himself. It grew out of two themes which Rather pressed over and over again.

First, there was the matter of the American pilots and other fighting men taken by the Communists and now held as prisoners of war. Next there was the matter of the American troops left behind after the phased withdrawal is finally completed.

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AT LENGTH, Mr. Nixon himself brought the two together in a question. He said: "I know sometimes you and some of your colleagues have pointed out . . . that if when we had 430,000 men in Vietnam we had no effect in getting the enemy to negotiate on POWs, why would having 25,000 or 35,000 as a residual force have any effect? The answer is: Does the enemy want the United States to withdraw from Vietnam or doesn't it?"

To me that can only mean one thing. It can only mean that President Nixon is prepared to pull out all American troops in return for release of the POWs by the other side.

Moreover, there are strong signs that the President couples withdrawal of all American troops and cessation of all American offensive actions in Vietnam.

Mr. Nixon was asked at one point whether withdrawal meant "no Americans, land, sea or air, no residual force fighting in support of Laotians, Cambodians, or South Vietnamese."

He replied: "That depends on . . . the situation with regard to our POWs."

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THE TERMS now being served up to Hanoi represent by far the most skillfully conceived diplomatic package put together by Washington in the Vietnam war. It invokes the good offices of Russia and China. It is made when public passivity on the war in this country gives high credibility to the President's threats that, unless there is a negotiated settlement, there will be a residual American force in South Vietnam and continued American bombing of North Vietnam.

Unlike all previous offers, moreover, there is now no stuff about elections and cease fires and mutual withdrawals. To be sure, the White House issued a clarifying statement Monday which reasserted the old condition about the "South Vietnamese right to determine their own future."

However, that can be dropped any time in the coming year merely by finding that the South Vietnamese are in position to assert that right — that Vietnamization has, in fact, worked.

But will the other side accept? The Communists are going to consider what they lose by waiting until after the American election. They will probably calculate that after the election they will get at least the same offer, and maybe a better one.

So the chances for acceptance of Mr. Nixon's coming gambit, shrewd as it may seem, do not look good.