

The last mile to a Vietnam settlement yet to be walked

NEW YORK — President Nixon, with understandable satisfaction, remarked during his Tuesday night broadcast that it was "difficult to see how anyone, regardless of his past position on the war, could now say that we have not gone the extra mile in offering a settlement that is fair to everybody concerned."

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That well may be a prophetic political statement. The proposals Nixon disclosed himself to have made—and, even more important, the fact that he had made them—are likely to appeal to the war-weary American people as the most any President could be expected to do. There will also be those to whom it will seem that he now has done as much as any of his potential Democratic opponents have said they would do.

Nevertheless, the last mile remains somewhere ahead of us. For one thing, despite all the advance leaks to set up the assumption, Nixon's proposals did not set a date for American withdrawal in return for the release of American POW's by the same date; rather the President offered to withdraw six months after the other side agreed in principle to release the POW's, to stop shooting, and to accept elections as a means of determining the future of South Vietnam.

A point to clear up

Later clarifications by Dr. Henry Kissinger may suggest that the withdrawal-prisoner deal could be arranged separately; but that is not the wording of the text, nor was it the apparent meaning of the President in his speech. This is a point that needs to be cleared up, but as it now stands there is no such thing as a direct pledge to withdraw, provided only that the prisoners are released.

There was no mention, moreover, of the withdrawal of the powerful air units in Thailand that have done so much of the bombing of Laos and North Vietnam; or of the equally powerful naval air units that have so often pummeled North Vietnam; or of the CIA-financed army in Laos; and the withdrawal offer was coupled to the assertion—which Nixon's text also seemed to say would have to be agreed upon "in principle" before the American withdrawal—that all North Vietnamese forces would have to be withdrawn within that country's borders.

Aerial encirclement

This is a demand that Hanoi agree to give up its military positions in Laos,

Tom Wicker

Cambodia and South Vietnam and accept aerial encirclement from Thailand and the Gulf of Tonkin, in return for elections to determine the future of South Vietnam. The resignation of President Thieu one month before those elections would scarcely sweeten this bitter pill; he could still run for re-election, his whole administrative apparatus would still be in office, including the powerful province chiefs, and the whole thing would take place within the framework of his constitution. In his own speech in Saigon, Thieu made it clear also that the Vietnamese Communists could participate in the elections only if they laid down their arms and renounced violence. What about his own army and internal police?

The real reason

But the real reason why these latest proposals are not yet "the last mile" lies in the assumption and attitudes of those who put them forward—in Nixon's insistence, for example, that his plan is "fair to everybody concerned." Whether or not that is correct, such proposals would be appropriate and necessary when two equivalent positions were in deadlock and an even-handed compromise could both rescue the situation and provide justice. The hard truth is that this is not the case in Indochina.

The Nixon proposals, like every American peace plan ever put forward, assume that the United States is as much in the right in the war as Hanoi or the Viet

Cong; they assume that American forces have as proper a place in Indochina as do those of North Vietnam; they assume that North and South Vietnam are separate and equal nations, a dubious proposition historically, politically and legally; and while this latest plan asserts the right of the Vietnamese people to determine the future of South Vietnam, it also assumes that the U.S. has a right to say how that determination ought to be arrived at—by elections.

Trying to find a way

Above all, therefore, those who made this peace proposal assume either that this war has been rightly waged, or that the American people are not willing to be told that it has been wrongly waged. They are insisting upon a settlement that cannot be interpreted as a defeat or as the abandonment of a war that cannot be won. They are trying to find some way to make it appear, in the end, that the lives sacrificed to this war have not been wasted, and that worthy objectives have been attained.

That is understandable politically, and it may even be that no President could take any other attitude and survive. But until some President does—until the truth is admitted that this is a war that should not have been fought, and should be fought not a day longer—the last mile will not have been walked.

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