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The Politics of Scoundrelism

"A man that should call everything by its right name would hardly pass the street without being knocked down as a common enemy." --Lord Halifax, 17th Century.

By EDWARD S. HERMAN

An election year, military difficulties in Cambodia and Laos, and intensified criticism of the automated war in Indo-China, have made the China trip insufficient to mute criticism of the Nixon win policy. Mr. Nixon has therefore felt compelled to return to the Johnson type ploy, and in fact the new "peace initiative" is a slightly modified version of Johnson's San Antonio formula.

In order to understand President Nixon's new peace plan it is important, first, to consider its relationship to the aims of his established policy of "Vietnamization" plus bombing. It is clear that Mr. Nixon has been trying, within a post-Johnson set of political constraints, to preserve an anti-Communist government in South Vietnam - the identical objective sought by Lyndon Johnson. When Mr. Nixon took office the NLF was still too strong, so that a settlement based on the existing balance of forces was

deemed unacceptable. The strategy adopted was to try by military means to alter the power equation in the South. The primary constraints, based on domestic political requirements, were the need to maintain low American casualties, reduced outlays, and the appearance of extrication. These constraints have been met. And the policy of military force has been fully implemented: the enemy's rural population base has been damaged and disorganized by incessant bombing; his political cadres have been hunted down and "neutralized" under the Phoenix program; and the Saigon junta has been bolstered by unconditional political support and a U.S. - financed build-up of a huge army and police force. For the next phase of implementation of the Nixon policy the North Vietnamese must somehow be gotten out of South Vietnam, the NLF must be isolated from this and other sources of aid; then, perhaps, our military client, with our continued financial and logistical support, might prevail.

It should be apparent that if this is Mr. Nixon's basic "game plan," "elections" are beside the point; Nixon has put his money on a basically military solution. He may wish to have the success of this policy

of force ratified by a demonstration election, and he may use an appeal to "elections" as part of a public relations strategy, but in terms of basic objectives and tactics, and given the objective situation in Vietnam, a Nixon-Thieu-sponsored election can have nothing at all to do with giving the South Vietnamese any right of choice of self-determination. Keep in mind that the NLF, according to Douglas Pike, has been the only "truly mass-based political party in South Vietnam," and junta members have been saying for years that U.S. forces must remain because the junta is still unable to compete politically with the NLF. If this is so, the Johnson-Nixon policy has been one of fighting against self-determination, which was not going the way we liked - and the use of phrases like "free choice" and "free elections" by the architects of such a policy is sheer hypocrisy.

The Nixon policies have, in fact, made elections less and less workable as a means of settling the war. The huge army and police force and anti-democratic politicians we have sponsored are incompatible with "freedom" of anything (except looting). At this point, also, a very substantial fraction, perhaps as many as a third, of the population of South Vietnam is either on the American payroll or dependent on our financial presence. South Vietnam is a financial client state, with what may be a historically unique proportion of its citizenry on the payroll of a foreign "city hall." The peasantry--the NLF's primary population base - has been periodically assaulted and dispersed by U.S. policies into refugee camps or into the cities. This terrorized and disrupted majority could participate effectively in a formal democratic process only under conditions of knowledge and security that do not exist. No international supervisory body could assure a fair and free election in this badly disorganized and militarized state, with its huge and continuing foreign presence. (Which may explain Nixon's extreme vagueness on the who and how of handling the mechanics of supervision.)

There is every reason to believe, however, that President Nixon does not expect his new proposal to be accepted or to work, except for public relations ends. How else can he explain his publicizing the "secret" talks and castigating the NLF and North Vietnamese for alleged non-cooperation? Are these consistent with a desire to do business, or with an intent to make PR gains at the expense of negotiations prospects? The timing of the new proposal, in an election year, and when Mr. Nixon is under pressure on Vietnam, is suggestive. The acceptance of the proposal by General Thieu, who has never been willing to hold credible elections, even under highly con-



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trolled conditions, gives the show away. The proposal is part of the game plan directed to fooling the crowd, not the opposing players.

Under the Nixon proposal, General Theiu would be in complete charge until one month prior to the election. President Nixon does not suggest that Saigon forces would have to lay down their arms, although the NLF would be expected to do so. There is no suggestion that the immense U.S. presence would be terminated – U.S. combat troops would be out, by election eve, but financial aid, and economic, political, intelligence, and “advisory” personnel would presumably still be there.

It is also very important to realize that the sheer weight of American power has forced underground many N L F members and their supporters; and t h e y are not likely to be willing to expose themselves, or accept a cease fire, until after an assured political settlement has been reached. The dice are thus loaded in favor of the Saigon regime, and the result would be a foregone conclusion (and totally incompatible with any “free choice” by the South Vietnamese). To accept Mr. Nixon’s proposal, the NLF and DRV would have to be prepared to surrender, militarily and politically. They would also have to agree to the humiliation of not merely accepting defeat, but participating in and thus legitimizing a triumph for General Theiu, who they regard as a quisling.

The Nixon proposal will be rejected, a fact which must have been known and, as with Johnson, intended. But once again an official peace move has convinced many Americans that their leaders are offering a compromise political solution. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is clearer than ever that a compromise political settlement must start with the formation of a government representing many factions, with real power; it must precede an election, not emerge from it. The NLF has agreed to join a government that includes all major factions in the South, with itself in a minority status. It is this compromise that Mr. Nixon is struggling to avoid, as he resorts once more to a formula known to be unworkable, and to an election process that he has helped destroy as a mechanism of accommodation.

It is sad that so much of the media and so many politicians have been unable or unwilling to expose this public relations gambit – ominous, too, as it may permit Mr. Nixon to clear the ground once again for an intensified quest for the long sought military victory, direct or by proxy.

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