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Secretary Laird and the Star-News Are Right

Not a week has gone by since the President had a minion lash Congress for daring to suggest that the time to get out of the Vietnam war is now. And yet Melvin R. Laird, who has been Mr. Nixon's own Defense Secretary the last four years, reports that the success of "Vietnamization" makes possible "today . . . the complete termination of American involvement in the war." Like those in Congress supporting a war-fund cutoff, Mr. Laird adds only one condition: the safe return of American prisoners of war and an accounting of the missing.

Listening to Mr. Laird, House Armed Services chairman F. Edward Hebert, entirely an administration loyalist on the war, replied, "we have got to get that honorable peace." And what is that? "The honorable peace," Chairman Hebert explained, "depends solely on the return of those POWs and an account of the missing and I think you share that opinion."

"I do," answered Mr. Laird.

We have not heard the White House lash Mr. Laird or Mr. Hebert for undercutting the Paris talks by their suggestion that, as the Secretary put it, the United States has done "the most any ally could reasonably expect, for no nation can provide to another the will and determination to survive." Nor do we expect to. (Mr. Laird's prepared remarks on Vietnam are excerpted elsewhere on this page.)

Look elsewhere, at, for instance, newspapers which have been sympathetic to Mr. Nixon on the war. Last Friday, the Wall Street Journal said that "the one thing the Americans ought to insist on" at Paris is "a bare minimum of good faith in Hanoi . . . In blunt terms, the barest minimum of good faith means first we get the prisoners back, then, if they [Hanoi] like, they have their offensive . . . By now the United States has done everything that could reasonably be expected of an ally; if Saigon does not in fact survive the fault clearly will be its own."

On Sunday the Washington Star-News declared: "we would urge that, if an acceptable and honorable political settlement appears impossible, both parties [at Paris] abandon the search and secure what is in their power

to achieve: the end, now and forever, of U.S. air and naval attacks against North Vietnam and the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. forces in South Vietnam in return for repatriation of the American prisoners of war."

Is not the point clear that it is not simply policy critics or political rivals of the President, but friends and supporters who are urging on him a course he apparently resists. Consider the list: the Secretary of Defense, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Star-News? These are not parties which can be easily accused of being "irresponsible," the designation put on Congressional Democrats last Sunday by the President's *communications director*, Herbert Klein. (That by his uncommunicativeness, Mr. Nixon has earned italics for that title, appears incontestable. Last Saturday, for instance, another editorially friendly newspaper, the Chicago Tribune, said: "The situation cries for candor on the part of the President, and for explanations which have been lacking.")

Mr. Klein went on to claim that the President's 61 per cent victory in the November elections had given him "a very clear mandate to proceed the way he has on Vietnam." It is a claim so flimsy and specious we question whether Mr. Nixon would dare make it for himself, should he deign to appear in public. For a good deal more than a judgment on Mr. Nixon's Vietnam policy went into that 61 per cent. In so far as such a judgment did enter in, the vote was in our view a mandate for the "peace" which the electorate has just been assured was "at hand." It was not a mandate to level downtown Hanoi, or to continue putting American blood, treasure and, yes, honor at risk to a questionable political outcome in Saigon. Certainly it was not a mandate for Mr. Nixon to heed again, as he evidently did last month, the pleas of the wily President Thieu and let go of the agreement that his and Hanoi's negotiators had put within his reach.

Mr. Nixon said last year that the war is no longer an issue among the American people. He is right: they all want out. For ourselves, we'll stand with Secretary Laird and the Star-News and, this time around, we fervently hope Mr. Nixon will too.