

## Testing the Truce

One month after the ink is dry the imprecisions of the Vietnam cease-fire agreements are starting to confound the signatories.

The international supervisory machinery is in danger of being pronounced stillborn. The separation between the process of returning American war prisoners and that of releasing Vietnamese civilian detainees is under challenge from Hanoi. Both these issues demanded painstaking attention during the months of negotiations last fall. But no amount of legalistic language on signed documents can enforce an agreement; all that matters now is how strongly the former belligerents perceive their interests in preserving the delicate structure of the Jan. 28 accords.

Hanoi apparently decided to try playing its prime bargaining chip—the American war prisoners not yet released—for, perhaps, one last round. President Nixon lost no time yesterday in signaling that on the prisoner issue above all he will tolerate no laxity in implementing the exact terms of the truce.

\* \* \*

Mr. Nixon's position seems clearly justified by the language of the agreements. Article IV of the relevant Protocol states without any conditions that the return of captured Americans "shall be completed within sixty days of the signing of the agreement at a rate no slower than the rate of withdrawal from South Vietnam of United States forces. . . ." With half of the American troops now withdrawn from South Vietnam, the Administration is rightly insisting that North Vietnam maintain the same proportion in handing back its prisoners.

Hanoi spokesmen base their sudden foot-dragging on another sentence in the same Protocol, in Article VII dealing with the liberation of Vietnamese civilians detained in South Vietnam: "The two South Vietnamese parties will do their utmost to resolve this question within ninety days after the cease-fire comes into effect." Hanoi charges that the representatives of President Thieu have barred all progress on this knotty issue.

If President Nixon is right to press Hanoi about returning the prisoners, it is also in United States interests to press Saigon into a more convincing display of "doing its utmost" to resolve the separate but morally equal issue of freeing the civilian detainees.

\* \* \*

The problem of prisoners may be relatively clear-cut in its assignment of responsibilities, but the question of international supervision seems hopelessly mired in ambiguities and vagueness from which it may never emerge intact.

Canada's Foreign Minister, Mitchell W. Sharp, was characteristically blunt and incisive at the opening of the Vietnam peace conference in Paris Monday. "Without a permanent political party to oversee the cease-fire, the International Commission for Control and Supervision [of which Canada is one of the four members] cannot be efficient," Mr. Sharp said. "We see very little sense in reporting to the ex-belligerents that they are breaking the truce."

Yet that is, in effect, the situation which the Paris conference seems about to endorse, leaving responsibility for maintaining the cease-fire to the former belligerents themselves. Communist opposition to an effective on-going authority for policing the truce appears to have won against the United States effort to engage the United Nations for more meaningful international guarantees.

Maybe it could not have been otherwise, but there is a tinge of lost opportunity for world order in the emerging reality that Washington and Hanoi will ultimately be alone in keeping their uneasy peace as they were in waging their inconclusive war.

See letter to editor, 14 Mar 73.