

Not Much Of A Peace

By Tom Wicker

The first month of "cease-fire" in South Vietnam has not been gratifying for anyone, except for the release of the first group of American prisoners. Fighting continues at unacceptable levels, international control is nowhere really in evidence, and not even a beginning has been made on the longer-range question of the political development of Vietnam.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that difficulties also developed over the release of more P.O.W.'s and the further withdrawal of American troops. That was the central exchange between Hanoi and Washington, and it could hardly have been unaffected by the other failures and disagreements.

President Nixon is clearly right that, so long as he keeps the agreed schedule for troop withdrawal, Hanoi is legally obligated to keep to its schedule for releasing American prisoners. On the other hand, if the North Vietnamese Government believes that the over-all agreement is not being adhered to by the Saigon Government and its American supporters, a delay in releasing its prisoners is the most effective bargaining device it has, and legal obligations are not likely to deter its use.

Short of a resumption of military action, Mr. Nixon's best defense against that tactic—since the small remaining American force in South Viet-

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nam probably is of little interest to Hanoi—is to see to it as best he can that the total agreement is reasonably kept. But that is not going to be easy, for several reasons.

One is the sheer difficulty of policing everything that happens in South Vietnam, a difficulty that would be considerable even if there were smoothly functioning control machinery. There is no such machinery and no one—as the Canadian participants are complaining—to hear or to act upon the reports of such organizations as there are.

Both Saigon and the Vietcong, with their North Vietnamese backers, seem to have sought as much last-minute military advantage as they could get, particularly in villages and territory they can claim to have "under control"; naturally enough, therefore, both also have resisted the other's efforts. In the absence of effective policing, that kind of see-saw struggle could go on quite a while.

The basic reason is that neither Saigon nor its Vietnamese adversaries have really acquiesced in a peace agreement, putting an end to their long struggle and signaling collaboration in future political development; rather, Saigon is an unwilling participant in what was basically a deal between Hanoi and Washington to get the Americans out of the war, and to leave Vietnam to a Vietnamese solution. The struggle for that solution continues.

That is why it has seemed somewhat premature on Mr. Nixon's part to insist that he has achieved a "peace with honor" that can lead the world to a "generation of peace." It was understandable that he should want to put the best face possible on what he believes was the best agreement he could make; nevertheless, it seems clearer every day that a real peace has not been achieved, and that even the cease-fire may not be possible to reach, let alone sustain.

To say that is to raise more questions about Mr. Nixon's rhetoric than about the arrangement finally concluded at Paris. Critics of the war and students of Southeast Asia have long insisted—some since before American combat troops entered the war—that the future of Vietnam was a matter for the Vietnamese to decide, both historically and under the international procedures agreed upon at Geneva in 1954.

American policy, which never accepted the Geneva agreement, came to insist, instead, that South Vietnam was a legally constituted nation being subverted and invaded by another power; and that view is implied even in the documents that finally produced the cease-fire.

The events surrounding the Paris negotiations suggest, however, that this implication was designed more nearly to serve Saigon's political needs than to reflect actual American policy in the 1970's. No matter to what extent the South Vietnamese have been armed, aided and exhorted, the fact remains that the Paris agreements leave it to the Vietnamese to work out the political future of Vietnam.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the fighting continues and that neither Vietnamese side shows much willingness, as yet, to cooperate with the other, even in peace-keeping measures. The Americans—at least those in Army uniforms—are going home, and Mr. Nixon is claiming credit as a peacemaker, but for the Vietnamese, the real struggle lies ahead. The chances are not bright that it will be political rather than military.