

Disengagement at Hand

The coming week is to mark a turning point in Vietnam as momentous as the declaration of cease-fire two months ago. By Wednesday all American prisoners of war are supposed to be released from captivity in North Vietnam. And, for the first time in a decade, there are to be no more United States military personnel on duty with the South Vietnamese armed forces.

Last minute sparring by both sides about the terms of the prisoner release and corresponding troop withdrawal is hardly surprising, for once the scheduled transfers are completed North Vietnam and the United States will have used up their most effective leverage against each other.

Administration supporters and critics alike have independently discovered virtue in silence about United States responsibilities in Vietnam after this first stage of disengagement. No one has wanted to say or do anything that could disrupt the process of freeing prisoners and withdrawing troops. The rationale for this reticence is about to end.

The critical and so far unanswered question about Vietnam's immediate future is whether the Nixon Administration claims a responsibility or a right to enforce the truce provisions on its own. There are no secret commitments, the White House insists; no right to unilateral policing actions exists on the official records. The Paris conference documents state explicitly that in the event of any violations of the cease-fire agreements, the signatories "shall, either individually or jointly, consult with the other parties to this act with a view to determining necessary remedial measures."

Yet the impression passed around in Washington seems to be that President Nixon would not hesitate to resume bombing or other combat operations against North Vietnam if the terms of the truce are too blatantly violated. Some officials even imply that the President has the right, under some "emergency" powers, to act without Congressional or international authority to enforce the cease-fire agreements.

With disengagement, the United States would no longer be calling the shots in South Vietnam. Enforcement of the truce arrangements will be the responsibility of an international mechanism and, ultimately, the Vietnamese parties themselves. The end of direct United States intervention in Vietnam should be firmly proclaimed.