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No. 231

October 27, 1970

Seeing war as Hanoi does

By Carl T. Rowan

WASHINGTON — That frustrating war in Indochina must seem all the more perplexing and troubling to Americans this week.

President Nixon finally made a peace proposal that Americans of almost all political persuasions could commend. It seemed to this reporter, as it did to millions of Americans, to offer a sane and humane way to end a struggle that has become a blight on mankind and isn't going to do anyone any great good.

But from the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese we get only volleys of sarcasm and insult as a response.

Lyndon B. Johnson must have sat in Texas watching this outpouring of Communist invective and thought: "Well, the country now sees what I was up against. I made secret offers of a cease-fire, U.S. troop withdrawals, internationally supervised free elections with a pledge to honor the results even if the Communists win . . . but the Communists rejected all my offers, then the world accused me of blocking peace."

Is it simply that the Communists truly did not trust Johnson or that they really believe Nixon is being "tricky" or "deceptive?"

THE REAL ANSWER seems to lie in the strategy, the intentions, the reasoning of the Communists as to how to wind up with the greatest victory. We Americans keep expecting Communist responses based on our notions of "logic," but

Communist thinking may be far different.

We can hope and pray that Hanoi and the Viet Cong will soon agree to a cease-fire so as to halt the killing; that they will see the decency and justice of an immediate prisoner exchange, a move which by logic would seem to hold more problems for the Saigon government than for Hanoi; that they will promptly agree to talk seriously about a peaceful settlement.

But we had also better brace ourselves for the probability that what follows is really the kind of thinking which prevails in Viet Cong and North Vietnamese ruling circles:

● The American troops are moving out, slowly but surely. Every time the Americans offer a new proposal they give us more of what we have been demanding. So why should we rush to accept a compromise when time is clearly on our side and stalling will give us total victory?

● Of course Nixon's new plan is a lot more forthcoming than anything he offered us before. But that only proves that "the American imperialists" are negotiating from weakness. With the elections coming up in the States, Nixon has to offer something. So he expects us to help the American paper tiger save face and to help him minimize the political damage of pulling out of Vietnam. Why should we help people who have bombed our towns and killed tens of thousands of our young men? No, we will suffer and endure until we have wrung the last humiliation out of the Americans.

● MAYBE THE AMERICANS are really ready to negotiate, but this is a bad time from our standpoint. "The imperialists" keep boasting that because of their military assault on Cambodia and the success of "Vietnamization" they are in the strongest military position ever. Clearly, we ought to pull off another

military spectacular ourselves just to show them that we are still very potent. With our bargaining position thus improved, we might think about negotiations.

● We don't have to worry that by assailing Nixon's recent "peace" offer we will push to his side the American war critics and suddenly find a solid front of Americans fighting against us. For political and ideological reasons the American doves will be right back at Nixon's throat in a few weeks. Despite early praise of his speech, the people will never let him go back to the hard line, so in time he has to come more and more our way. We'll wait.

Sure, it is woefully pessimistic to think that this is the shape of Hanoi's logic. But recent history suggests it might also be realistic.

And thus does tragedy compound tragedy.

U. S. INFORMATION SERVICES

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