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Public Posture on Talks Threatens Diplomatic Probe

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Through the good offices of Rumania, apparently, Washington has undertaken a formal diplomatic probe of the possibility of talks with Hanoi on the war in Vietnam. And that probe continues with the chance of talks still open.

But the tough negotiating stand taken up publicly by the President in his State of the Union message has now been publicly rejected in a tough way by Hanoi. And the harsh public positions suggest that it is going to be very hard to keep the negotiating possibilities alive in the diplomatic probe.

The basic fact is that each side is under strong pressure to take up positions unacceptable to the other. Barring an heroic act of leadership, the internal politics of each regime work against peace.

In Washington, of course, the major political fact is the President's bid for reelection in 1968. Recently the President's chances of winning have been looking up.

Mr. Johnson apparently feels—and not wrongly, it seems to me—that his strong showing in the polls is connected with the posture he has been taking on Vietnam. His stance, as reflected in speeches, visits to army camps, trips abroad, and appearances with General Westmoreland and other military heroes, has been the hard-line stance of running against the Vietnicks and dissenters.

By taking that stand, the President has been winning

to his side not merely the proponents of the Vietnamese war. He has also been winning over all of those who are uneasy about dissent in the land. He has been winning over the unyoung, the unblack, and the unpoor who comprise the great bulk of the electorate.

WITH MATTERS going relatively well, the President is naturally reluctant to change the formula. A cessation of bombing in particular—unless it was sure to bring peace which it is not—could be very costly politically.

In these circumstances, it has taken heroic efforts by the President's chief advisers—including Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara—to win approval for the private diplomatic probe. And that approval could be unstuck at any time, if it appeared that the hardline electoral coalition Mr. Johnson has been putting together was endangered.

On the other side, a political tug-of-war has plainly been going on among Hanoi and its supporters and dependents. The bombing of the North has undoubtedly hurt. Against that background various European Communist states, themselves concerned lest the war spread, have been urging the North Vietnamese leadership to try to probe for terms.

The Chinese Communists, however, obviously want the war to continue. So—judging by an extremely tough interview given by the Algerian representative of the National Liberation Front, or Vietcong, to Sander Vanocur of NBC—do the officials most closely involved in the fighting in South Vietnam.

IN THIS situation the leadership in Hanoi seems to have blocked out a compromise. They will agree to talks in order to get the bombing stopped. At the talks they will probe out the political possibilities. But they will not abate the fighting in the South, unless the talks yield the possibility of an approach to political power for the Front.

This compromise is evi-

dently a very touchy thing politically. That is why Hanoi reacts very sharply—as it did in rejecting the President's State of the Union formula—to suggestions that talks be accompanied by an abatement of the fighting in South Vietnam.

To break this vicious circle there is obviously required some special act of political leadership. And at this point the overpowering strength of this country becomes relevant. For if the President can bring himself to it, politically, the security of this country can obviously stand the bombing halt which those in favor of talks on the other side need to move towards negotiations.

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