

at the beginning - as merely an operational decision made for "technical reasons."

This decision, obviously, was made in Washington and by President Johnson.

Mr. W. Averell Harriman's unexpected mission to Warsaw and Ambassador Goldberg's to the Vatican are confirming evidence that a serious U.S. peace offensive is under way. But perhaps the most significant sign of all is the sudden discreet silence in Washington on Viet Nam. For once there have been no "leaks" or accompanying public statements. When diplomacy becomes serious, it must be private.

The continuing ground war in Viet Nam and the landing of additional American troops should be a warning against hasty conclusions by Hanoi and any wishful thinkers that the United States is ready to sound retreat. It would be a grave miscalculation of U.S. resolve for the Communists to spurn peace talks under the delusion that complete victory was in their grasp.

Despite the peace-marchers and the draft-card burners, the prevailing mood in the United States is to see a dirty job through if an honorable settlement cannot be reached.

Mr. Johnson's delicate task is to continue to exert enough military pressure to show that the U.S. will not renege on its commitments, but not so much as to make negotiations impossible. A risk for peace is worth taking.

The Christmas truce, short and imperfect as it was, the bombing pause and the Viet Cong offer of a four-day ceasefire over the Vietnamese lunar New Year all indicate that both sides are worrying about where the increasing level of violence is leading.

But these respites will be only cruel and cynical posturing if they are not accompanied by real efforts to reach a lasting truce. If the initiatives fail, a war will go on from which it will become increasingly difficult for either side to extricate itself short of total victory or ignominious defeat.

Negotiations and peace will not come easily. The experience of the long-drawn out ending of the Korean War show how almost haphazardly a settlement was reached. Simply because no neat ending is in sight should be no reason to despair of peace.