

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 1972

PAGE A26

Peace in Vietnam: "You Can Bank on It"

The situation in Vietnam, the President told the Star-News yesterday, is that "we are going to have a settlement—you can bank on it." As best we can make out, Washington and Hanoi have agreed in principle to stop fighting each other. That means final American military withdrawal and an end to the bombing and mining. However (see below), they have not yet agreed to what forces Hanoi will be allowed to keep in South Vietnam, and under what conditions. Hanoi wants to keep in place all its forces, estimated at 140,000, as long as possible in order to protect Vietcong military and political cadres, to bargain for release of the thousands of cadre in President Thieu's jails, and generally to offset the weight which Thieu's million-man army and other armed elements will grant him in the political struggle sure to continue, probably to intensify, as the Americans leave. On its part, Washington wants to limit the number, tenure and political leverage of those North Vietnamese soldiers, so as to help President Thieu. Naturally, Thieu is clamoring for as much American help—in pre-cessate-fire arms, in time, in squeezing bargaining concessions from Hanoi, in continued American bombing and mining—as he can get.

But when will the bargaining end over Hanoi's troops in the South? That is, when will "peace" come? On Oct. 25, the White House leaked to the New York Times the exclusive word, which it printed Oct. 26, that "American officials now believe that there will be a cease-fire in Indochina in the next few weeks, possibly even before election day." On Oct. 26, Henry Kissinger, claiming that Hanoi's overnight disclosure of settlement terms had unsealed the administration's lips, confirmed the disclosure as essentially correct and went on to say, "peace is at hand." Thus on election eve, to a people aching for an end to the war, the administration deliberately cast the impression that peace was indeed, at last, "at hand."

From Murrey Marder's report in The Washington Post yesterday, we now know the impression was false. "We never intended to wrap this up by election day," an administration official conceded to Marder. Why? Because the establishment of a cease-fire was bound to be "messy," possibly embarrassing to Mr. Nixon in the period before the election. Although Mr. Kissinger had discussed with Hanoi

different timetables for concluding an agreement, the last one pegged to Oct. 31, the President decided to slip that date, even though it meant risking rebuke by Hanoi.

In sum, the Nixon administration misled the American people into thinking that peace was imminent: "possibly even before election day." Mr. Nixon decided not to accept a particular Indochina cease-fire timetable which had been agreed on, in some measure, with North Vietnam. And, as events since then have made plain, Mr. Nixon determined to use the extra time—and to use also whatever extra bargaining advantage his re-election may have bestowed—to renegotiate the terms earlier agreed on with Hanoi, while rushing warplanes and other armaments to the South Vietnamese.

This is why we do not find it possible to estimate when "peace" will come. The administration asserts it will be within "weeks." Christmas has a nice ring to it. One imagines the President might like to be able to report "mission accomplished" on Inaugural Day. We fervently hope that is an outer limit. For meanwhile, the war goes on, prisoners remain captive, bombs fall, people die.

We see no need today to spell out again our doubts that the American people, had they been told in 1968 the general nature of the settlement that was to be claimed in 1972, would have agreed to pay what it has cost to get it. We would note, however, the dangers inherent in the President's continuing to describe the settlement he has in mind as—in his election-night remarks—"peace with honor, the kind of peace that will last." This is not only disingenuous but misguided. Mr. Nixon cannot conceivably know what will be the political shape of Indochina in one month after "peace," and still less in a year, or even 10 years. It is wrong and unnecessary to commit his own and the nation's prestige to achievement of a state of affairs which he can neither bring about nor guarantee. For a man newly committed to national unity, it only rakes up embers best left unraked to continue suggesting after the election that those who have differed with him on Vietnam advocate a "peace with surrender." Can Mr. Nixon not accept that he has just overwhelmingly been re-elected President of the United States?