The story of a peace initiative

One night last week Presidential Aide Henry Kissinger looked up from his office dinner of Delmonico steak and baked potato to see, standing on the deep blue carpet, Richard Nixon with a wide grin on his face. Behind him trailed Presidential Valet Manolo Sanchez with a briefcase of papers. Kissinger paused in his meal and listened as Nixon read him a few paragraphs. They were the closing words, still top secret, of the peace proposals Nixon would broadcast to the world the next evening.

Just the night before, aboard Air Force One *en route* back from Europe, the President had gone over Writer Bill Safire's draft of this critical document and decided that what it lacked was a soaring conclusion, something which would lift the subject matter above the jungles of Vietnam and relate it to the whole breadth of American aspirations. Now at last he had the words:

"I believe every American deeply believes in his heart that the proudest legacy the United States can leave during this period when we are the strongest nation in the world is that our power was used to defend freedom, not to destroy it: to preserve the peace, not to break the peace."

It was the culmination of a process that started last December. Then Nixon and his principal advisers were beginning to worry about the accuracy and dependability of the reports they were getting about the state of the war in Vietnam. During the Kennedy and Johnson administrations well-meaning men had been trapped into acting on bad information. Under Secretary of State Richardson and Kissinger launched a thorough "security study" of Vietnam to determine independently and accurately the situation on the ground. Special teams were dispatched to Vietnam. First 14 key provinces in all the four corps areas were surveyed. Later, the sample was upped to 22 provinces, half the total country. By mid-February data was coming in. It meshed with a growing conviction that a new peace initiative had to be formulated.

In a 12-minute speech, Nixon presented his peace proposals

At first, three types of cease-fire were considered. A total North Vietnamese withdrawal had the virtue of simplicity but was probably unacceptable. A formal shifting and regrouping of contending forces seemed possible but unlikely. A standstill cease-fire seemed most possible of all but entailed the most risks. The new security data, however, suggested that while there were elements of hazard (Communist main force units were nearby, Vietnamization was not proceeding as fast as desired) they might be manageable. Further, the projections indicated that combat in the next months would not gain significant advantages. Richardson and Kissinger went back and forth in their evaluations before both men decided the risks were worth it.

Quietly, the White House and State Department plunged ahead, prodded by the President. Along the way came Cambodia. Nixon's decision to invade the country and clean out the Communist sanctuaries was tied in with his peace initiative, although the President could not reveal that at the time of the invasion.

Another element in the pattern was the appointment of a new negotiator in Paris. David Bruce, approached by the White House, hesitated. He would take the position only if there was to be a new initiative. He was assured there would be.

In the secret summer meetings experts drew up a map showing what the country might look like with a standstill cease-fire. A majority of the population would be under allied control. A majority of the territory would be Vietcong dominated. These intelligence estimates were validated by the facts which emerged from the Cambodian invasion. A system of surveillance for a cease-fire in case it was accepted was devised. It remains secret, but planners feel confident it will work.

By midsummer it was decided to hold up the new initiative until the North Vietnamese representatives returned to Paris. At one point Sept. 23 was the date set, then the Mideast crisis and the eight-point proposal by the North Vietnamese caused slippage.

Four weeks ago the first detailed approaches were made to South Vietnam's President Thieu. There was surprisingly little difficulty. Thieu himself had talked about a possible cease-fire and while he had a few technical questions he gave his consent.

Two days before Nixon left for his European journey, Kissinger flew off to Paris. His mission had two parts—to go over the peace plan in detail with Bruce and his deputy Philip Habib and to seek a conference with South Vietnam's Vice President Ky. At the embassy, Kissinger, Bruce and Habib climbed into one of those bizarre security tanks that the key embassies use for secret talks. They are bug-free plastic cocoons that do not rest against walls or on the floors. In that strange atmosphere the three men reached final agreement. The President should go ahead. Then Kissinger spent a slightly uneasy hour and a half with Ky, not sure how much Ky knew about the secret plans, but gently suggesting that new developments were in the wind and that his understanding was essential.

Journeying on to Rome, Kissinger met Nixon at the airport and reported Bruce and Habib's concurrence. The next night Nixon, Secretary of State William Rogers and Kissinger gathered in the President's cabin aboard the Sixth Fleet's aircraft carrier *Saratoga* to give final approval. The news of Nasser's death which arrived a few minutes later did not change the President's mind.

A debate which had gone on until this moment was just how the new initiative should be presented. Bruce believed that it should have the full voice of the President behind it. Rogers thought at first it should be issued quietly by Bruce in Paris. Kissinger was in between. By the time of the *Saratoga* meeting, Kissinger and Rogers had sided with Bruce. Nixon agreed.

Safire was summoned from the Agnew political caravan back in the United States for the writing job. The text was complete by the time Nixon swooped down to visit the ancient haunts of his ancestors in Ireland. As his jet roared off into the Atlantic night, headed toward home, he was buried in his usual meticulous editing. Two nights later the world knew.

The first reaction from the North Vietnamese was negative, but this was strictly according to the rules of the game. Now all the secret lines of communication were open, ready and waiting. It would be the signals passing over them that counted.