

Vietnam: The Same Old Shell Game

Those who value form over substance may find a political triumph in Mr. Nixon's new "Plan for Peace" in Indochina—a veritable political masterstroke, courtesy of nationwide TV. Senator Mansfield, for example, hailed it as a long step forward; Senators Muskie and Humphrey welcomed it as a new initiative. The President himself called it "generous," as if generosity had any place in our dealings with a ruthless and relentless adversary. Republican sympathizers are delighting in the way the rug is supposed to have been pulled from under those who have been advocating a "date certain" for our withdrawal in exchange for our prisoners of war—on the theory that this is what the President has been secretly offering. This is what was meant to dazzle us—along with the drama of Dr. Kissinger's thirteen transatlantic trips, the secret dealings, the surprise. We are meant to believe, in short, that the President has "gone the extra mile for peace" and that whatever happens next—continued impasse, a new Communist offensive, an increase in American casualties, a prolonged, open-ended war—is not his fault.

Well you can make the argument that it is Hanoi's fault, or even that the whole war is Hanoi's, (or Peking's or Moscow's) fault, and not gain much by doing so. You can prove, as Mr. Nixon did, that the enemy has been duplicitous, but that is hardly a revelation. You can assert that Mr. Nixon has tried what some of his critics have long been urging him to try, but even if that were so, (which it isn't) it doesn't help much when it doesn't work—except perhaps at home, politically for a time. The fact of the matter is, of course, that there is drama in the unveiling of a secret peace initiative and a little vindication, perhaps, and not much else—not even, in this case, much surprise.

Last November 12, just about the time when Dr. Kissinger was busiest on his Parisian rounds, the President was asked if he had any reason for encouragement concerning prospects for release of our POWs, and he replied: "No reason for encouragement that I can talk about publicly. I can say, however, that we are pursuing this subject, as I have indicated on several occasions in a number of channels . . ." So the likelihood of private dealings was always there and the real surprise is in the terms the President was offering "the other side"; there is, in fact, no better way to measure the significance of the President's hitherto secret "plan for peace" than by comparing it with one he was proposing publicly in October, 1970—when there were 384,000 American troops in South Vietnam. At that time, Mr. Nixon announced that the United States would offer in Paris a plan for:

"An agreed timetable for complete withdrawal as part of an over-all settlement";

An immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of war held by both sides;

A fair political solution, which would "reflect the existing relationship of political forces" in South Vietnam. The U.S., he said, would abide

by the outcome (whether one reached by negotiation or election, he did not specify) and he added that "we know that when the conflict ends, the other side will be there, and the only kind of settlement that will endure is one both sides have an interest in preserving (in other words, an eventual piece of the action in Saigon was held out to the Communists);

An Indochina peace conference, to negotiate a wider settlement which would be guided by the terms of the Geneva Accords of 1954 (Vietnam) and 1962 (Laos).

A cease fire, to be internationally supervised.

That, then, was the Nixon peace plan fifteen months ago, publicly put forth in Paris. What is essentially new or different about the one Dr. Kissinger has been pushing secretly? Essentially nothing, except that elaborate election machinery has been added—an electoral process made in America, rooted in democratic institutions which are alien to the Vietnamese, and one to which Hanoi has been consistently hostile. That, and an eye-catching deadline of six months for U.S. troop withdrawal, which is about as uncertain a "date certain" as could be devised, depending as it does on an agreement not just on prisoner exchange, as the President's leading critics have proposed, but on working out the incredibly difficult details of a cease fire and an election procedure.

This, we are asked to believe, is a new peace plan whose unilateral, public disclosure is likely to break the impasse with Hanoi. This, we are told, is progress, when in fact it is more of the same old shell game. It may work, for a time, for as this game has been played with the Vietnam war over the years, the hand of a government in possession of a secret and in command of prime time has proved more often than not to be quicker than the eye. But the real news here is not of a new peace plan, or even of an earnest secret initiative. What the President told us Tuesday night was nothing more or less than that he and Dr. Kissinger have been privately pressing upon Hanoi a rather shopworn peace plan, only slightly refurbished, and that over a period of 30 months they have been had; he is telling us that he still wants it done the American way and that the North Vietnamese are still not buying it; he is telling us that negotiation isn't working, and that this, by his own admission leaves the alternative of "Vietnamization" which he is frank enough to describe as the "long voyage home."

So unless there is a lot the President isn't telling us, we are just where we were before we learned of Dr. Kissinger's secret travel: still insistent on having it our way; still counting on the North Vietnamese to abandon the goals of some forty years of fighting; still unwilling to act upon the President's own, public estimates (also offered in Oct., 1970) that the "South Vietnamese have gained the capability to handle the situation"—and with less and less to offer, as our ground forces shrink, in exchange for our prisoners of war.

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