

Breakdown in Paris

The indefinite suspension of the renewed public peace talks in Paris by the United States and South Vietnam deals an ominous blow to what may be the last chance for quickly ending the bloodshed in Indochina and for extricating American fighting men and prisoners in safety and honor.

The nation can only hope that the Administration will continue to pursue through private channels the possibility of a negotiated settlement that would inevitably envisage a change in the present composition of the Saigon Government. However, Ambassador Porter's statement that the decision to break off the public talks reflects "a complete lack of progress in every available channel" seems to leave little room for maneuver.

The outcome of the current battles cannot help but affect the bargaining positions at the peace table. But one thing is clear. The true American and South Vietnamese interest lies in maintaining secret contact and in pursuing the four-party semipublic talks. Whether the battle for Hué ends in victory, defeat or standoff, a compromise settlement must be negotiated to end the war and the American involvement.

The United States has nothing to lose by continuing the talks, even if they yield nothing at present beyond propaganda exchanges. But a breakdown in the talks and the renewed hints now of resuming the futile and purposeless bombing of the Hanoi-Haiphong area can only delay the political settlement that now is more urgent than ever.

The prospect of still further escalation of American bombing in both South and North Vietnam is dangerously unrealistic:

It would not be likely to affect significantly the situation on the ground in South Vietnam, as has been repeatedly demonstrated. Even if the battleline can be stabilized, the illusion that Saigon's forces could stand on their own in the foreseeable future, without massive American air and naval support, has been decisively shattered.

Large-scale American re-escalation would be far more likely to create a bloodbath more horrible than any possible reprisals that might follow a political settlement.

It could jeopardize the promising fruits of Mr. Nixon's diplomatic overtures to Peking and Moscow, and set an example of superpower brinkmanship with perilously destabilizing repercussions in other parts of the world.

The advisers who are pressing the President to follow the course of re-escalation are the same men who have been assuring American Presidents for years that just one more turn of the military screw would solve the complex problems of Southeast Asia. The current debacle in Indochina that their faulty intelligence and false optimism has wrought should be evidence enough to persuade Mr. Nixon to turn to more sober counsel.