Peace With Honor

By Anthony Lewis

ABROAD AT HOME

The United States bombed North Vietnam over Christmas, 1972, in order to persuade *South* Vietnam to accept the truce agreement. By "brutalizing" Hanoi, as Gen. Alexander Haig put it to Nguyen Van Thieu in Saigon, we aimed to convince President Thieu that he would be militarily secure after the truce.

That conclusion emerges irresistibly from a remarkable study of American negotiating tactics in the years leading up to the signing of the Vietnam agreement in January, 1973. The account is by Tad Szulc, a former New York Times correspondent; it appears in the new issue of the magazine Foreign Policy.

The article reflects access to previousy unpublished documents, giving the first-hand flavor of such things as the Haig-Thieu talk. But its significance, which is considerable, lies not in juicy details but in the picture it gives of the whole sweep of an extended diplomatic event. Mr. Szulc is spare in drawing his own inferences: He lets the reader draw them from his powerful array of facts.

The concession that eventually made agreement possible, according to this account, was made secretly by the United States in April, 1972—in Moscow. Henry Kissinger told Leonid Brezhnev that the United States would accept a cease-fire without demanding withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops that had been in the South before April 1.

The question that leaps to mind is why the United States waited so long, through so many years and deaths, to make that concession. Mr. Szulc says that as early as 1970 a National Security Council study advised Mr. Kissinger that Hanoi would never agree to remove its troops from the South. The answer indicated here is that the prospect of the 1972 election is what concentrated Mr. Kissinger's mind—and perhaps persuaded his master to give him a freer hand.

Mr. Kissinger is inevitably the main focus of this article. His negotiating techniques are laid bare. To a notable extent, they amount to deception: telling each side what it wants to hear. In Vietnam, the technique failed in the end—after a last virtuoso display of two-faced tactics.

In May, 1972, during the Nixon-Brezhnev summit, Mr. Kissinger confided further American concessions to the Russians. In June he went to Peking and, with Chou En-lai, took a conciliatory philosophical line toward Hanoi.

Then in July he visited President Thieu in Saigon—and sounded very different. The Nixon Administration had to talk peace because of the upcoming election, he said; it would make seemingly attractive proposals, knowing that Hanoi would reject them. After the election it would be a "different story": America would not hesitate to bring Hanoi to its knees. He recommended that Mr. Thieu plan an invasion of North Vietnam after the election.

President Thieu was not told about the American negotiating concession. Mr. Kissinger was obviously confident that he could bring him along when terms were agreed with Hanoi. But when the secret talks with Le Duc Tho produced a draft agreement in October, Mr. Thieu was angry and recalcitrant. He blocked all the carefully made plans, even though Mr. Nixon had cabled Hanoi on Oct. 21 that "the text of the agreement could be considered complete."

In a major move to appease President Thieu, the United States immediately began rushing $1 billion in new military equipment to him. On Nov. 20, in a fresh round of talks with Le Duc Tho, Mr. Kissinger read "for the record" a South Vietnamese document demanding 69 changes in the text.

At that point, according to Mr. Szulc, the North Vietnamese began looking as if they had cold feet about the whole thing. That was hardly surprising, after the United States had set out to transform the battlefield situation and inject new issues into the talks.

Only then did Hanoi propose textual changes of its own. Mr. Kissinger denounced them as perfidious. The Christmas bombing began. By the time it ended, President Thieu was much more agreeable.

Many outside observers of the truce negotiations have felt all along that the Christmas bombing was designed mainly to bring Saigon along. We know that the bombing had no measurable effect on the terms reached with Hanoi, because the text signed in January was virtually identical with the October draft.

Reading the Szulc study, one perceives an even more cynical possibility: Mr. Kissinger may have presented Saigon's demands on Nov. 20—demands that he knew were unacceptable—precisely in order to provoke new proposals from Hanoi that could serve as an excuse for bombing.

In any event, the record is clear that the United States backed off an agreement, then bombed the other party to mollify a recalcitrant ally. Whatever other diplomatic accomplishments history credits to Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon, that episode will forever blacken their names, and their country's.

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