

## Clearing It With Saigon

When President Nixon on July 1 named the new chief negotiator in the Paris peace parleys, he said that Ambassador Bruce would have "great flexibility in the conduct of his talks" except for two conditions. After this week's Presidential news conference, that flexibility appears to have been severely restricted.

During the past six months, as a result of Ambassador Lodge's departure, no negotiations have been possible. The North Vietnamese refused to meet privately with Ambassador Habib, previously the third-ranking American in Paris, and finally withdrew their top negotiators. Mr. Habib was left "holding the horse" for a new rider, as he himself reportedly described the situation.

The naming of Mr. Bruce reopened the possibility of secret meetings in Paris with top Communist negotiators. But new meetings are likely to encounter the same old deadlock if the participants simply repeat the same old tired formulas. Mr. Habib is known to have new suggestions; others have been long under consideration in the State Department. Mr. Bruce's study both of these proposals and the Paris record in recent weeks presumably had led to some preliminary conclusions. But before any of this could be laid out in conclave before the President and his chief advisers, Mr. Nixon told a snap news conference that Mr. Bruce's "great latitude" would, in fact, be quite limited.

The President indicated that no new proposals will be made initially, that Mr. Bruce will be limited to discussing past American and Communist proposals and that he will be barred from making any "new approaches" without first gaining the approval of Washington and, probably, Saigon. This is not an unusual role for career ambassadors in normal situations. But it is a long way from the role Mr. Nixon suggested on July 1 when he said Mr. Bruce would be given "great flexibility" except for "two conditions." The two conditions, which were not new on July 1, were that the United States would insist on the right of the South Vietnamese to determine their own future and would not "impose" a coalition government, including Communists.

The Administration previously had emphasized that these formulations did not exclude the possibility of a negotiated agreement between the Saigon Government and the Communists on sharing or dividing power, nor preliminary Washington-Hanoi discussions of such a solution. But Mr. Nixon has now placed such strong emphasis on President Thieu's view that elections are the only route to a political settlement that he has severely limited Mr. Bruce's ability to devise other approaches.

At a time when every effort should be centered on the new Paris initiative, Mr. Nixon instead has focused attention on Saigon's veto power, going so far as to say: "A [political] settlement in that [Paris] forum would seem to be highly improbable. . . . President Thieu has indicated that he in that forum would not agree to a coalition government."

There are other routes to a settlement "that reflects the political forces in South Vietnam," a phrase Mr. Nixon again used this week. Negotiation of a ceasefire, a proposal Mr. Nixon seems to regard more favorably now than in the past, could bring about a regional division of power in the pre-election period. A round-table conference of South Vietnamese political factions, an approach Mr. Nixon hinted at this week, could get around Communist refusal to negotiate with the "Thieu-Ky regime."

But no avenue open to Mr. Bruce is likely to lead very far so long as his every step must be cleared with Saigon.