

The public will recognize the new deception on Vietnam

LONDON — The spread of cynicism in the United States, the loss of faith in the political process, can be traced back in significant part to the election of 1964. A good many people felt afterward, whether or not they articulated the thought, that they had been the victims of a deception. Lyndon Johnson had run as the peace candidate, won in a landslide and then quickly slipped the country into war.

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Kissinger is a smart and careful man. One cannot imagine him using such language lightly—language with the definitive, even proud ring of the word "obvious." He knows far too much about the history of Vietnam to have based such flat statements on mere wishful thinking. He must have believed, as he said, that peace was "within reach in a matter of weeks or less."

What, then, went wrong?

The other side

According to Kissinger, in his latest White House press conference, it was the other side that made difficulties. Le Duc Tho kept trying to reopen settled questions of principle. There were now important disagreements about the size and powers of the proposed international truce supervision team, and about language reflecting Saigon's claim to sovereignty over all of South Vietnam.

Of course Hanoi may have been difficult when the talks resumed after the American election; the whole history of negotiations on Vietnam makes a straight-forward path to peace unlikely. But Kissinger's claim that it was all the other side's fault is pathetically unconvincing.

'We cannot fail'

"It is obvious," Kissinger said on Oct. 26, "that a war that has been raging for 10 years is drawing to a conclusion . . . It is obvious that most of the difficult

problems have been dealt with . . . having come this far, we cannot fail and we will not fail . . ."

Morevoer, the draft agreement explicitly ruled out treating South Vietnam as a juridically independent country. The very first paragraph of the summary published by Hanoi Oct. 26, which Kissinger acknowledged as "a very fair account," said the United States would respect "the independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Vietnam as recognized by the 1954 Geneva Agreements."

In other words, the draft terms continued the Geneva formula of regarding Vietnam as one country, divided by a temporary military line. Since that has always been the view of Hanoi, it would hardly have tried to reopen this part of the agreement. And in fact there is no secret about who did: The United States, at the urging of Nguyen Van Thieu.

Why did Kissinger go back to Paris with fresh demands that have evidently made the whole agreement come unstuck? One explanation may simply be overconfidence: He and others in Washington may have believed the familiar reports that the Communists were desperate and would agree to anything. If so, there is hope that after a few weeks of charges and countercharges the peace talks could get back on the track.

The two issues

Consider the two issues that he now suggests are the sticking points. The first, that of the truce supervision team, Kissinger treated lightly, indeed jocularly, at his news conference of Oct. 26. He quipped that this section of the draft agreement would "no doubt occupy grad-

uents for many years." And that "my colleague," Ambassador William H. Sullivan, really understood it.

As for the Saigon government's claim to be the sole legal sovereign of all South Vietnam, the basic approach of the draft agreement negated that. For it was an agreement on a standstill ceasefire, with the two warring parties in the south continuing to control their own areas and committed to work toward an eventual political settlement.

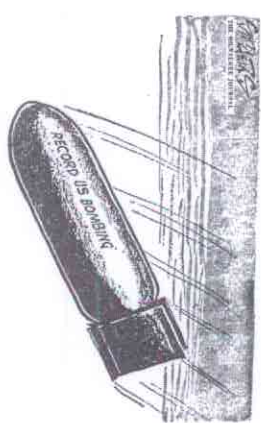
'A very fair account'

President Nixon has really not made the fundamental decision to settle this war for less than victory, to accept compromise. For it is the essence of compromise to obscure such root issues as sovereignty. Was it accident that Kissinger kept referring to the final decision being up to "the President"?

Henry Kissinger's credibility is one casualty of this turn in the Vietnam saga. For whatever reason, he has been caught out in what the public will see as a deception. His awareness of that may account for his descent from the serious, magnanimous tone of his Oct. 26 news conference to the pique and pettiness of his latest.

But no one need grieve too much for Kissinger; he will survive. If American cynicism deepens, the real victims will be the Vietnamese, North and South, for the American bombs keep falling in a war that daily grows more senseless.

'With every passing day, peace comes perceptibly nearer.'—William Porter, chief U.S. negotiator.



Henry Kissinger
Credibility a casualty



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