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It Might Have Been

IN THE NATION

By Tom Wicker

This is a time of reflection and reminiscence and wondering for everyone whose life and work and attitude were altered by Vietnam. Secretary Kissinger, for example, recalling his negotiation of the Paris accords of 1973, said at his news conference the other day:

"We wanted what was considered peace with honor—that the United States would not end a war by overthrowing a government with which it had been associated. And that still seems like an objective that was correct."

An objective that was correct, yes; but the accords were only a means to that end, and the means specifically included negotiation and "national reconciliation" in Vietnam. Mr. Kissinger does not yet seem to have put to himself the question asked by Richard Holbrooke, a former Foreign Service officer in Vietnam and now the editor of Foreign Policy magazine:

"Why did we never go to Thieu, after Paris and the Congressional arms cutoff, and tell him that this was a new world and he had better negotiate unless he wanted defeat?"

The answer is clearly that against all the evidence of weakness in South Vietnam and determination in North Vietnam, the United States believed it could prop up an anti-Communist regime in the South indefinitely, maybe even make it at some point self-supporting. On the other hand, it was an article of faith that negotiations at best would produce power-sharing with the Communists, and that would inevitably lead to complete Communist domination of Vietnam.

Maybe it would or maybe it wouldn't have, but the unassailable fact is that the "no negotiation" policy insisted upon for twenty years by five Presidents has led to complete Communist domination of Vietnam, as well as the abject humiliation of having to snatch the last Americans out of Saigon by helicopter, just before the deluge.

The opposite is not necessarily true, that a policy of negotiation might have produced something like a neutralist regime. But undertaken soon enough, even a negotiation that led to Communist domination might have prevented the long and bloody post-1965 phase of the war, the incalculable political, economic and social consequences in the United States(and the ultimate American rout.

The recent accession of Duong Van Minh to "power" ostensibly to negotiate a settlement with the victorious Communists recalls, for example, that in November, 1963, General Minh—having led the coup that overthrew and murdered Ngo Dinh Diem on Nov. 1—probably had a much earlier and more hopeful opportunity to negotiate a settlement with what was then known as the National Liberation Front.

On Oct. 2, 1963, Secretary of Defense McNamara had announced the United States' intention to withdraw most of its 25,000 troops from Vietnam by the end of 1965, and to pull out a thousand by the end of 1963. President Kennedy had said on Sept. 2 that however much help the Americans gave, "in the final analysis, it is their war. [The people of South Vietnam] are the ones who have to win it or lose it."

The military junta then ruling South Vietnam contained much "neutralist" sentiment (which was a major reason why it was overthrown a few months later by Nguyen Khan). "Big" Minh, though not a neutralist, was a South Vietnamese Buddhist of peasant stock who had led the overthrow of the Northern Catholic mandarin, Diem. With the Americans talking of withdrawal, the double-barrelled N.L.F. propaganda line against "a mandarin regime backed by white colonialists" had been set back. The repressions of the Diem Government, moreover, could be assumed to have been ended, at least reduced.

On Nov. 8, 1963, according to Jean Lacouture, the French journalist, the N.L.F. broadcast a statement that called for "negotiations between interested groups in South Vietnam, in order to arrive at a cease-fire and a solution to the great problems of the country." There is no official American record of this, but Washington did record a Nov. 13 broadcast in which the N.L.F. said the Minh junta could have "a future which will be brilliant, which will have no more nightmares," if it separated itself from the United States, worked for national independence and brought "freedom and democracy to the people."

Since President Kennedy had proved his machismo in the Cuban missile crisis the year before, and since he had just discovered in a September tour of the country that his limited nuclear test-ban treaty was highly popular, just the thing to underpin a 1964 peace campaign against Barry Goldwater, those November days might have been the right moment to urge Saigon into negotiations. After all, Mr. Kennedy already had agreed to a coalition with the Communists in Laos.

But on Nov. 22, 1963, John Kennedy was murdered and a different man in very different circumstances had taken his place. By Nov. 24, Lyndon B. Johnson already had told his ambassador in Saigon to assure Big Minh that he "can count on us"—even as Mr. Nixon a decade later gave Nguyen Van Thieu his "solid pledge" of support. With such assurances, why should Minh or Thieu have risked the negotiation no American President ever counseled?