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Thieu apparently remains major obstacle to peace

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LONDON — As Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger approach another round of talks, there are the most directly conflicting estimates of the prospect for agreement. Pessimistic reports from Paris say that the United States has attempted to reopen basic issues in the draft Vietnam peace terms published in October. But Washington officials, privately and publicly, say they are extremely optimistic that a final settlement will be reached soon.

Judgment difficult

It is difficult for outsiders to make a judgment, not least because the leaked pessimism and optimism may themselves be negotiating tactics, aimed at a particular party or section of opinion. But it may be useful to canvass various theories on what is obstructing the peace that Kissinger said on Oct. 26 was "a matter of weeks or less."

One theory is that Kissinger negotiated the October terms without the approval of his principal. Both the American right and the South Vietnamese government have been promoting that view. Human Events, the right-wing paper, said quickly that President Nixon was "displeased." The Saigon radio accused Kissinger of "contradicting the President's thinking."

Acted in ignorance?

Is it conceivable that Kissinger acted in ignorance or disregard of the President's views? No. Nixon of course kept in the closest touch with developments

in the crucial October negotiating sessions.

Then there is the theory that the American administration never really intended to agree, that it was all a political trick. Once the draft terms leaked out, under circumstances that are still not clear, Kissinger did try to put the best political face on them; he certainly exaggerated the imminence of peace. But I find no reason to believe that he was party to a cynical deception for election purposes.

Thieu underestimated

What, then, has been the problem since October? It can only be that Kissinger, and Nixon, underestimated the strength of President Thieu's likely objections to the draft agreement — and overestimated their ability to bring him along. Confronted with the reality of his opposition, Nixon evidently felt that it would be politically dangerous to try to resolve the problem before Nov. 7. Afterward, with his immense victory achieved, the President could take his time.

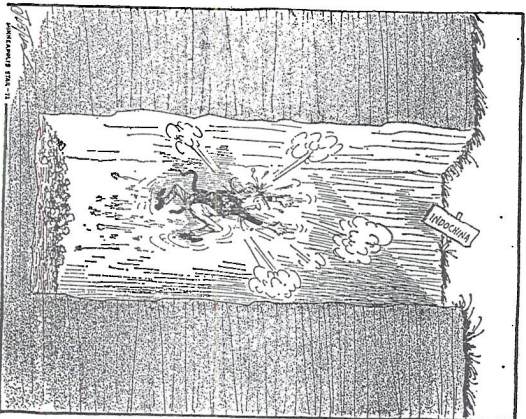
The indications are that Nixon has now made his decision. We shall learn from the orders to Henry Kissinger: Is he going back to Paris to insist on changes of substance in the draft agreement — changes to meet Thieu's demands? Or is he instructed to negotiate but in the end, after showing that he has tried, to sign

on roughly the October terms if they are the best available?

The difference could be one of war or peace. Kissinger must know that, for no American can be more aware than he of the immense difficulty of moving the North Vietnamese on what they regard as basic issues. His whole negotiating effort for four years has been to try to avoid such confrontations when possible.

A good example is the issue of North Vietnamese troops in the south — troops that they do not admit having there and in any case regard as legitimate. As long ago as May 31, 1971, the demand for a specific pledge of North Vietnamese troop withdrawal without a mutual pledge from Hanoi. To press the demand again now, at Saigon's urging, would be

Falling in was easy!



to put the whole agreement in jeopardy. In short, the decisive question is what it always has been: Will an American President be willing to take the political risk of signing peace terms that do not have the active approval of Nguyen Van Thieu?

The danger is of falling into the old delusion that just a little more war, a little more bombing, will improve the situation enough to satisfy Thieu. It is a delusion because Thieu has made very clear that nothing will really satisfy him except total victory — the destruction of all forces in South Vietnam opposed to his regime. He will agree to compromise peace terms only when he sees that the United States is ready to sign without him.

The Nixon total

Critics, seeing the familiar choice for American policy today, would say that it has been devastating folly all along to make that policy dependent on Thieu. Devastating, that is, for the Vietnamese. In the month of October alone, during the apparent hold-up of peace on Thieu's behalf, American planes dropped 94,364 tons of bombs on Vietnam, North and South. That brought the total for the Nixon years to more than 4 million tons.

Whatever the rights or wrongs of the past, can it really be that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger would carry that terror and destruction into the indefinite future rather than differ with Nguyen Van Thieu?

It is on the belief that the answer to that question must be no that one's hope for peace in Vietnam now rests.

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