



The Time Is Ripe To Settle the War

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Paris

A LONG TALK with the chief North Vietnamese negotiator at the Peace Talks here in Paris combines with my sense of the Moscow Summit to convince me that a ripe time for settling the war has at last come round.

While basic negotiating positions seem far apart, the differences can in fact be reconciled by folding political change in Saigon into the envelope of a double cease-fire.

On the North Vietnamese side, the Moscow Summit plainly dealt a hard blow to the supreme cockiness that has characterized Hanoi's outlook in the past. I asked Le Duc Tho, the chief Communist negotiator here, two questions about the summit.

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ONE HAD to do with the brief, and rather cold, two-sentence formula employed by Russia to summarize her position on Vietnam in the communique from the Moscow Summit. I also asked about the fact that the Soviet authorities had concealed from the Russian people word that a Soviet ship had been sunk and Russian lives lost during a recent American raid on Haiphong harbor.

In response to these questions, Tho showed none of the exuberant and sure-footed capacity for expression that stamps him as a man of genuine political authority. He merely said: "You cannot draw conclusions from such petty events."

Tho went on from there to voice a now familiar claim that Hanoi has no intention of installing a Communist government in

South Vietnam. He added that he believed that the right way to end the war was by negotiation in Paris. He said he looked forward to an early resumption of secret talks with President Nixon's chief foreign policy adviser, Henry Kissinger.

My strong impression is that, far more than ever in the past, the North Vietnamese feel themselves diplomatically isolated. They seem willing to settle, provided there can be some signs of political revolution in Saigon centering around the resignation of the South Vietnamese President, Nguyen Van Thieu.

As to the American side, Mr. Nixon scored an undoubted success at the Moscow Summit. But he and his advisers know that the Russians are not going to let Hanoi go down to defeat. They also know that there is no military magic in the bombing of North Vietnam and the blocking of its ports. More than ever, in other words, they are aware that they can only settle the war by negotiation.

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AS TO TERMS, Washington is not opposed in principle to political change in South Vietnam. The sticking point is how to make it come about. The Communists believe that Washington should simply change the government. Tho, indeed, talked about Washington naming ministers in Saigon as though it was a matter of turning on faucets.

In fact, for moral, psychological and practical reasons, President Nixon cannot simply torpedo the head of an allied government. He has insisted, rightly I believe, that any change should be made by the Vietnamese themselves.