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# Gloomy Outlook for A Negotiated Peace

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## Hanoi

A EUROPEAN diplomat here in Hanoi once asked North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong why he didn't make the same arrangement with President Nixon that he had made with French Premier Pierre Mendes-France at the time of the Geneva settlement of 1954. That would mean a cease-fire first, and then a political settlement.

Pham Van Dong replied: "We had many disagreements with Mendes-France. But when he said something was black, it was black. When he said something was white, it was white. We trusted him. We don't trust Nixon."

Trust is indispensable because the basic positions are far apart. With respect to the central issue, which is the question of who rules South Vietnam, the governments in Washington and Hanoi have almost exactly opposite intentions.

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WASHINGTON, over the years, has accumulated certain commitments to the South Vietnamese government of President Nguyen Van Thieu. President Nixon has special feelings about these commitments. Thousands of Americans have died during his Presidency to make them good.

The regime here in Hanoi takes an almost opposite position. Its main objective — an objective sanctioned by the blood of thousands — is unification with South Vietnam. As a minimal, first step in that direction, Hanoi seeks to accomplish a change in the Saigon regime.

To be sure, it is possible to imagine all kinds of accommodations between these two positions. In particular, there appears

to be an area of give in the attitude the other side takes toward the timetable for unification.

In talks here with Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh and the chief Communist negotiator at the Paris Talks, Le Duc Tho, I have repeatedly been assured that North Vietnam is prepared to wait a long time (several years) before actually moving to take over in the south.

The relaxed attitude of the timetable seems to lend itself to a settlement by stages. In the first stage there would be accomplished the total withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam and surrounding territories. Simultaneously with the completion of that stage, the last of the American prisoners held by Hanoi would be released, and there would also take place the resignation of President Nguyen Van Thieu.

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AFTER THAT, in the next stage, the working out of a political settlement would be between Hanoi and Saigon. With all American forces gone for good and Thieu out, Hanoi could expect to achieve a very favorable outcome.

But just try telling that to any official here. At once the trust problem comes to the surface. As one North Vietnamese diplomat put it:

"We would be foolish to let the prisoners go before reaching a political agreement. Once we let them go, Nixon would resume bombing all over again."

Accordingly, I wind up my trip to Hanoi full of doubts about the negotiating prospect. My general impression is that so much mistrust has accumulated that there is only an outside chance for an early agreement.