



# Playing Politics With Vietnam War

**Joseph Kraft**

**T**HE Democrats and Republicans are both right when they accuse each other of playing politics with the Vietnam War. But these days everything to do with Vietnam is also connected with the American election.

Playing politics with the war may not present a pleasing spectacle. But it is inevitable and it actively fosters the steps necessary to a settlement.

The politicization of the war finds its roots on the other side. Not that the Communists are standing fast in the belief that George McGovern will win the election and offer them easy terms. On the contrary, during the two weeks I spent in Hanoi last month, I met no Vietnamese official who believed McGovern had even a fair chance to win.

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**W**HAT THE North Vietnamese do believe is that the impending election gives Mr. Nixon special incentive to come to terms. As Le Duc Tho, the chief Communist negotiator in the Paris Talks, put it in an interview in Hanoi: "if Mr. Nixon makes a settlement, his reelection is certain."

Feeling that the President had a special interest in settling during the pre-election period, Hanoi responded to coaxing from the Russians and Chinese by agreeing to resume secret talks with Mr. Nixon's chief negotiator, Henry Kissinger, in Paris last month. The North Vietnamese figured that even if the talks yielded nothing, they would be in better position after the effort to elicit support from Russia and China.

Hanoi also calculated that it could probably wring from the talks an end of the bombing of North Vietnam.

Finally, there was always the outside

chance that, with an election pending, Mr. Nixon might consent to the one step that would truly yield an agreement — the dropping of President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam.

With the North Vietnamese exploiting the political climate, Mr. Nixon replied in kind. Before allowing Kissinger to resume the secret meetings, the President insisted on the right to make public news of the meetings. Now, whatever the President's real intentions, the White House announces Kissinger's meetings and trips in a way that makes it seem peace is in the works.

Moreover, there is the continued bombing of North Vietnam on a big scale. That may have had a military logic when the South Vietnamese Army looked to be coming apart. But sometime between now and the presidential election, Mr. Nixon is almost bound to stop the bombing. That will also make it seem — whatever Mr. Nixon's real intentions — that peace is on its way.

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**T**HE POSSIBILITY that peace may be in the works has made it very difficult for the democrats to use the war issue. So far, the democratic thrusts against the war have not been very effective; but they don't have to be. Anything which serves to remind the country that the war is still going on, four years after Mr. Nixon took office with a "plan" to end it, works against the President.

The more Vietnam is in the news, the less support there is for the war. That is why even going through the motions of making peace has in itself the effect of rendering Mr. Nixon less and less able to hold out against a change of government in Saigon, which is the necessary price of a settlement.