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Vietnam: That Missed Opportunity

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WASHINGTON—The American public is entitled to know what the President's current plan is to end the war in Vietnam. As the election campaign heats up, Henry Kissinger has held highly publicized secret talks in Paris and in Saigon. An impression that real progress toward peace is being made is being created. Secretary Rogers personally predicts peace before the end of the year. Yet nothing has been disclosed of the substance of these talks and therefore it is impossible to judge whether realistic offers are being made or whether the flurry of activity is just part of the effort to re-elect the President.

The last public United States offer was the withdrawal of all American troops within four months after the start of an internationally supervised cease-fire and the return of our prisoners. If the North Vietnamese are being required to give up permanently their military struggle while Thieu remains in power, there is no possibility of the offer being accepted.

When I was the American negotiator in Paris we recognized that cease-fire first was not a promising route. The North Vietnamese have been consistent in asserting that political and military aspects of a settlement are indivisible. To a guerrilla a cease-fire without some settlement is a surrender.

Any political settlement must necessarily involve the status of Thieu. Since the bombing halt of November 1968 opened the way to serious negotiations, President Thieu has been a major obstacle to a compromise solution.

Although we had agreed in October 1968 to join the negotiations after the bombing stopped, he first reneged on his commitment and then created

the unseemly dispute over the shape of the table in order to break off or at least to delay talks until the new Administration took office. Finally, just before the inauguration in 1969, the path was cleared for substantive negotiations including the private talks which were the only place progress could be made.

During this period the North Vietnamese had removed most of their forces from the northern two provinces of South Vietnam and practically ceased fighting there. Instead of seizing the opportunity for immediate discussion of mutual reduction of hostilities which Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford had publicly called for as the first order of business, the Nixon Administration took as its first task restoring of close relations with Mr. Thieu. These relations had become badly frayed as the Johnson Administration applied pressure to induce Mr. Thieu to participate in the peace talks.

Then, as now, President Thieu saw his primary goal as maintaining his personal position. This meant opposing a negotiated solution since any compromise would inevitably eliminate his absolute power.

The Nixon Administration tolerated Thieu's scuttling of real negotiations by refusing to have his representatives participate in private meetings with the National Liberation Front. When, two months later, he condescended to accept private meetings, he stated that under no circumstances would he agree to a coalition government. He continues to oppose adamantly any coalition government although it is obvious that there can be no political settlement without some sharing of power.

Even now, when the comings and goings of Dr. Kissinger have raised some hope of moving toward peace,

Mr. Thieu has again dug in his heels. This month he called for continuing "relentless bombing" of North Vietnam for "six or seven months more" to produce the "total destruction of their economic and war potential."

So far as we can tell, the Nixon Administration has continued to give Mr. Thieu veto power over the United States negotiating position. Despite the Administration's avowed solicitude for the right of the South Vietnamese people to self-determination it helped to create and then excused the faults of Thieu's re-election in a one-candidate race. The overwhelming majority of the South Vietnamese people clearly want peace. They showed this by giving the most votes in last August's Senatorial election to a Buddhist slate which emphasized a compromise peace. Instead the people have been made victims of continuing war and are subject to repressive military rule, including the jailing and torturing of non-Communist opponents and the suppression of the press.

American men should not continue to die to maintain Mr. Thieu in office. We should be told whether the Administration intends to continue to fight the war for one man.

The danger is great that if President Nixon should be re-elected without ending our involvement in the war, he would then construe his victory as a mandate to continue his present policy—and more Americans and more Vietnamese would go on dying for Thieu.

W. Averell Harriman was President Johnson's Ambassador to the Paris talks.