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Nixon has a chance of settling the war

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WASHINGTON — "I'm sure of one thing. The war will be over. The war won't be hanging over us in a second term."

These remarkable words were spoken by the President of the United States to this reporter's colleague-brother, Stewart Alsop of Newsweek. The statement is not only remarkably interesting, in and of itself. It also

Joseph Alsop

deserves consideration for the important light it casts on the intensely secretive negotiations being carried on with the North Vietnamese by Dr. Henry A. Kissinger.

McGovern dead wrong

One thing is obvious about the famous secret talks that have taken place this summer. Sen. George McGovern was dead wrong when he charged that these talks were a kind of political smokescreen organized by the President to deceive the American public.

Or perhaps one should say that Sen. McGovern was dead wrong, unless his friends and admirers in Hanoi have taken leave of their wits. After all, two parties are needed in a conference room, even for the most secret of secret talks. If the North Vietnamese had not wanted to talk, it would have been supremely easy to refrain from sending Le Duc Tho to meet with Dr. Kissinger.

This point was stressed some time ago by Dr. Kissinger himself. The occasion was a meeting with Republican senators whose help was wanted by the President in one of the Senate's endless rows about Vietnam. At this meeting, the Kissinger theme was: "Give the talks a chance." He ended by remarking sardonically:

"You have to suppose that the talks really do have a chance, unless you prefer to suppose that the leaders in Hanoi are eager for President Nixon's re-election."

The unchallengeable truth

Sen. McGovern's charge is evidence enough, in turn, for the unchallengeable truth of Dr. Kissinger's analysis. The mere fact of secret talks going on has been marginally helpful to President Nixon. That was why Sen. McGovern was so angry, quite plainly.

The next question is, therefore, just why the negotiations have a real chance now, when so many previous attempts of the same sort have so conspicuously failed. Here, the most probable answer is to be found in the Soviet and Chinese Communist

warnings to Hanoi previously reported in this space.

Hanoi warned

Both the Soviets and the Chinese fairly grimly warned the Hanoi leadership that if no settlement could be reached before the American election, they must certainly expect a newly re-elected President Nixon to be vastly rougher, tougher and harder to deal with. "Get the best settlement you can now, or expect far worse later," was the essence of these warnings by the two big brothers. And they were accompanied by a further warning that the President's re-election was all but dead certain.

In the President's remark to Stewart Alsop, the same theme was obviously implicit. If he is re-elected as all now expect, and if there has been no settlement in the interval, a great increase of presidential roughness and toughness must certainly be anticipated. The President's steely frankness on this point in both Peking and Moscow was the first cause, in fact, of the subsequent Soviet and Chinese warnings.

The final question

That leaves the final question. This is whether there is a good chance, or only an off-chance of the pre-election settlement that is the aim of the Kissinger-Le Duc Tho secret talks. Since the secrecy has been so total, it is only possible to answer the question by deductive logic. But logical analysis gives an interesting result.

To begin with, there can be no doubt whatever that the North Vietnamese have only agreed to talk because they have decided they must keep open the option of a pre-election settlement. To get such a complex settlement, moreover, the North Vietnamese cannot wait until the last Gallup or Harris poll before Election Day. Le Duc Tho will surely need to be instructed to get down to business with Dr. Kissinger by mid-September, if an October result is desired.

They may balk

Secondly, there can again be no doubt whatever that the Hanoi leaders will never instruct Le Duc Tho to get down to business if they can see any other reasonably safe alternative. Even if the risk seems very dreadful, they may still balk at the last minute. They will surely balk, too, if the trend of the present campaign begins to show a glimmer of hope for Sen. McGovern.

So logic leads you to a curious result. If (but only if) Gallup and Harris still show Sen. McGovern miles behind in mid-September, the chance of an honorable settlement will begin to be good.