

Nixon peace hopes fade; increased fighting seen

WASHINGTON — President Nixon was optimistic until a few weeks ago about achieving a cease-fire in Vietnam before the Nov. 7 election. Now he expects Hanoi to step up the fighting as the election comes closer.

Intelligence reports suggest that fighting on all fronts will be combined with guerrilla activity in the rear to create turmoil in South Vietnam and to undermine confidence in the Saigon government. But the real Communist aim, in Nixon's opinion, is to give the American voters the impression he can't end the war.

From sources close to the President, we have been told of his bitter disappointment over Hanoi's refusal to accept a cease-fire. He has responded with Cold War rhetoric, which he feels is the best political defense against the expected North Vietnamese offensive. But he would prefer to campaign as a peacemaker.

'Secret plan' promised

The story of his diplomatic-military maneuvering to settle the war began four years ago with his campaign promise of a "secret plan" to end the war. This was greeted with derision by Democrats and skepticism by others. But those privy to the President's strategy assure us that he not only had a "secret plan" but that it has come close to succeeding.

His "secret plan" simply was to appeal over Hanoi's head to Moscow and Peking. He hoped to sit down separately with Russian and Chinese leaders for some straight talk. He thought he could persuade them that U.S. friendship could be more valuable to them than Hanoi's favor.

Compelled to deal

Without the support of their two Communist allies, Nixon figured, the North Vietnamese would be compelled to come to terms. He was willing to offer terms, indeed, that he thought Hanoi would find hard to turn down.

Reaching Moscow and Peking took longer and the diplomacy was more sophisticated than the President had anticipated. But a month ago, it looked as if the scenario would turn out largely as he had foreseen.

He pressed for a cease-fire and the release of American prisoners. In return, he promised that the United States would cease all military activity, withdraw from Vietnam

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and leave it to the Vietnamese ultimately to settle their own affairs. He also made the point that he would be easier to deal with before his re-election than afterward.

Secret talks

Subsequently, the White House learned that both Moscow and Peking had advised Hanoi that Nixon would be re-elected and, therefore, that serious negotiations should be resumed. This led to the secret talks between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho.

The word from Moscow and Peking was so optimistic that the President felt sure he would get a cease-fire. President Thieu, for his part, even agreed to step down and permit an internationally supervised election in South Vietnam. But the negotiations broke down over the question of who would control the interim government.

President Nixon had expected to be able to tell the Republican convention last month how he had kept his end-the-war pledge. Instead, he returned to Cold War rhetoric in his acceptance speech, promising not to "betray our allies" nor to "stain the honor of the United States."

WASHINGTON WHIRL

Curious coincidence — State officials are required by the federal government to report their