



Nixon's Hat Trick-- Peace Before Elections

— **Joseph Alsop**

THE ODDS are improving somewhat on President Nixon's achieving the hat trick — meaning an acceptable settlement in Vietnam before Election Day. It is still an open bet, either way; but what has recently happened is interesting enough to deserve careful thought.

To begin with, it needs to be clearly understood that negotiating the details of a settlement is bound to be a contentious, time-consuming task, even after both sides have decided they want one. The Hanoi leadership has been warned of this in plain terms. But the leaders in Hanoi also have been warned, by their Soviet and Chinese friends, that the time to do business with the Presidents is before the election.

At best, at least a month will be needed to work out the details, if the moment finally comes when Hanoi's chief negotiator, Le Duc Tho, tells Henry Kissinger: "Let's stop sparring and get down to business." Thus the next fortnight or so is the crucial, last-chance period.

President Nixon is known to believe that if Le Duc Tho is NOT instructed to get down to business before the end of September, that will effectively imply Hanoi's decision against an early settlement. In that event, the North Vietnamese can be expected to try to aid Senator George McGovern, by driving their troops to produce the appearance of trouble in South Vietnam during October.

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ON THE OTHER hand, because of the time problem above-mentioned, President Nixon is also known to believe that the state of the U.S. election cam-

paign in mid-September will greatly influence the decision in Hanoi. In this connection, much impact can be expected from the Louis Harris poll, again showing Senator McGovern a dreadful 34 points behind.

Long ago, furthermore, the Hanoi leaders plainly decided to wait and see how things might develop, before making any gamble on Senator McGovern. That is the real meaning of the far from secret "secret meetings" between Le Duc Tho and Kissinger.

Thus far, the "secret meetings" have been nothing more nor less than a device for keeping Hanoi's options open, against the time when a decision about a future settlement would eventually have to be taken. Thus there was considerable meaning in the simple fact of the long meeting in Paris last Friday.

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THERE ARE also other facts to consider. En route to Paris, for one thing, Le Duc Tho clearly heard unpalatable news in Moscow. Until recently, the Soviet formula for relations with North Vietnam remained "all necessary aid until complete victory."

But when Le Duc Tho passed through Moscow, Pravda published an authoritative article merely promising "all-around aid." There was no mention whatever of "complete victory." The dilution of Soviet support was both obvious and serious.

For the politburo in Hanoi, however, the fact that Quang Tri has now been retaken by the South Vietnamese no doubt weighs heavier than any change of Soviet attitude.