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Inside Report

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Is Hanoi Eager to Settle?

By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

WASHINGTON — Although President Nixon has been pressuring North Vietnam for an "honorable" settlement of the war at least since Henry Kissinger's first secret mission to Paris in 1969, the hot tempo of the Paris talks can be traced not to Mr. Nixon so much as the Communist Party Politburo that runs North Vietnam.

Powerful signals that Hanoi really wants to find a compromise solution to the endless, bloody war have been crowding into the White House for months, including hints two months ago* that Hanoi might accept the presence of South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu in some form of coalition government.

BUT FOR HANOI, the bitter irony is that North Vietnam, not the U.S., has now become the most ardent suitor for peace in a dramatic reversal of roles. That reversal was unimaginable last spring when Hanoi was putting final touches on its massive Easter weekend offensive across the demilitarized zone.

With the antiwar movement then making dramatic gains in the U.S. Congress, the Hanoi scenario was transparently obvious: Exploit the peace movement by bloodying the war in the midst of the American election, thus compelling Mr. Nixon to come to terms or risk losing to a Democratic Party peace candidate such as Sen. George McGovern.

But what happened? Mr. Nixon unleashed the bombers, mined the harbors of North Vietnam and flew off to a glorious summit conference with Hanoi's allies in Moscow. Now, five months later, U.S. casualties are miniscule, and the peace move-

ment is quieter than at any time since 1969. Most important, political pressures on the President are actually operating against a pre-election settlement in favor of a post-election settlement.

The reasons for that are also obvious. If Mr. Nixon announced a settlement before Nov. 7, political critics would charge that he had deliberately timed it for maximum personal gain just before the election, raising the old specter of "Tricky Dick" Nixon.

Moreover, if the settlement contained elements of genuine compromise — as presidential advisers have long hinted it must — right wing conservatives in both parties might seek revenge on the President. In California especially, where McGovern has a chance to win, the presidential nominee of the American Independent Party, right-wing Republican Rep. John Schmitz, could cut deeply into Mr. Nixon's conservative support.

Accordingly, the President has elbow room to spare. The odds today are that the secret negotiations between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho will not resolve even the main issues — such as Thieu's future, the question of U.S. military aid to Saigon and the withdrawal of all "foreign" troops — until December at the earliest.

IN SHORT, neither the election campaign nor the date of the election has real bearing any longer on the negotiations, depriving Hanoi of what it had long regarded as Mr. Nixon's most vulnerable pressure point. Yet Hanoi is indisputably eager for a settlement, despite all its rhetoric about protracted warfare. The main reason: The effects of the mining and bombing on its supply systems.

*Republican convention opened in Miami Beach 21 Aug 72.