

## Peace Talks

'Still Many  
Difficult  
Things to  
Be Settled'

WASHINGTON — No more than a dozen men here and in Hanoi know how far they may be from a deal to end the war in Vietnam — if, indeed, the negotiators and their superiors now know. After one of the more dramatic weeks of both diplomatic and political maneuver, the rest of us can only venture some educated guesses from the snippets of comment and evidence.

Last week brought the longest and most sustained round in a long series of negotiations in Paris between President Nixon's principal agent, Henry A. Kissinger, and Le Duc Tho, the trusted emissary of North Vietnam's Politburo. These talks, twice prolonged in mid-course after baggage had been packed, followed intensive discussions in Saigon between President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam and Mr. Kissinger's deputy, Maj. Gen. Alexander M. Haig, Jr., who then sat at the Paris table for the first time.

The talks were punctuated — but, significantly, not interrupted — by major air raids upon Hanoi and the apparently accidental bombing of the French Mission in the heart of the city. French officials on the periphery of the Paris talks exploded in anger, but held to the view that there was progress in the bargaining and seemed to have extracted a promise of some respite for downtown Hanoi.

And the talks coincided — perhaps not accidentally — with Senator George McGovern's formal pledge on nationwide television that he would accept Hanoi's principal terms if elected, withdraw all American troops, equipment and military aid to the non-Communist governments of Indochina and thus force the South Vietnamese to seek their own peace.

Le Duc Tho left Paris Friday saying only that "there still are many difficult things to be settled." The White House agreed with that assessment shortly after Mr. Kissinger returned, authorizing a spokesman to say, "I think you could assume we would not challenge Le Duc Tho's statement."

But the mood at the White House after Mr. Kissinger's breakfast report to the President and Secretary of State William P. Rogers on Friday was one of cautious hope. The Administration obviously had a political interest in suggesting hope but it was not selling hard on the propaganda front. The atmosphere was one of serious business, in Hanoi as well as Washington — and the North Vietnamese could hardly be accused of wishing to promote Mr. Nixon's cause against Senator McGovern.

The men in Hanoi have been under some pressure from the Russians to give the United States yet another thorough hearing at the conference table. Nonetheless the depth of their interest must have been prompted by the promise they saw in Mr. Kissinger's portfolio.

The mood in Saigon was not only serious but anxious. President Thieu demonstrated defiance during the week, insisting that "we will have to kill the Communists to the last man before we can have peace" and vowing never to form a coalition with his enemies, to yield them no territory and promise them no such thing as neutrality. The Hanoi radio denounced the American bombing and argued that the White House was only trying "to dupe" the American voter into expecting an early agreement.

The unavoidable conclusion from all this was that both sides had good reason to engage in active negotiation, that there may now exist a shared desire to strike a bargain — within weeks if not days — but that their obvious mistrust after seven years of open conflict was still blocking agreement on the procedures of political evolution in South Vietnam and mutual disengagement of the rival military forces.

The influence of the election campaign upon all this was also unclear. Mr. Nixon had long led Hanoi — and its Soviet supporters — to believe that he would be most flexible in his season of political trial. Plainly, he would profit from a settlement, or even from the appearance of progress. But Senator McGovern's challenge has been so weak thus far that the North Vietnamese may be discounting the value of his pressure or the wisdom of waiting for him to unseat the President. And Mr. Nixon, in these circumstances, may indeed prefer to keep talking and to defer the diplomatic climax until after election day.

What could they be talking about?

The central issue of the war, and thus of any possible peace, has been the disposition of political power in Saigon. Senator McGovern took the position that this is none of the United States' business and that he would

trade a total American withdrawal and indifference to the fate of President Thieu's government for the return of American prisoners.

President Nixon has insisted that he would not do anything that would leave South Vietnam vulnerable to an early take-over by the Communists, militarily or politically, and that his non-Communist allies in Saigon must emerge with at least "a chance" of retaining power indefinitely. He will not end the bombing of North Vietnam until the prisoners are free and he will not cease military aid to South Vietnam until Hanoi's forces are reliably and permanently called home.

To this the North Vietnamese have said that they want a three-party coalition regime in Saigon to replace President Thieu, combining elements of his regime, the Vietcong and "neutral" figures of their joint designation. They deny that this implies a Communist "take-over" and foresee elections or other political institutions that would perpetuate the three-way sharing of power. Simultaneously they would expect an American withdrawal, guarantees against further American interference and a prisoner release.

The equation that lurks in these rival Washington and Hanoi plans would be the exchange of a Saigon coalition for a total military disengagement by both sides, with effective guarantees that neither process would soon be subverted or sabotaged and some arrangements that would make one dependent on the other.

The few available signs suggest that this is precisely the proposition under discussion and that the details of both political fusion in Saigon and an effective cease-fire and military withdrawals are extremely difficult to work out.

Hanoi could always resume military operations in South Vietnam and Washington could always resume bombing the North, but neither side would have anything to defend if the political arrangements in Saigon resulted in the collapse or slaughter of either wing of a coalition.

During Mr. Kissinger's extraordinary four days of meetings with Le Duc Tho in Paris, Vietnam specialists were said to have been at work here on dozens of problems that might result from different coalition formulas and efforts to protect a cease-fire and to prevent political murder and mayhem. During the talks also, Mr. Thieu kept denouncing coalition as a "wicked design," although he could not — as in 1968 — stubbornly await a better deal from a change of Presidents in Washington.

Apparently, the negotiators were discussing what role, if any, Mr. Thieu and his aides might play, at least in leading their portion of a new government. Hanoi broadcasters left the implication that executive power in Saigon would have to be tripartite but that new elections run by the interim coalition could determine the next National Assembly. The United States had always talked of new presidential elections run by Mr. Thieu's administration.

Through the week, the bombings continued, claiming five lives in the French mission in Hanoi and seriously injuring its chief, Pierre Susini. Ground fighting in South Vietnam centered on hamlets within 20 miles of Saigon. The White House apologized to the French, contending that the damage may have resulted from defensive missiles rather than bombs, but neither side relented militarily for the sake of the talks.

More meetings, perhaps many more, will obviously be needed, not only in Paris among adversaries but in Saigon among allies. If a settlement is within reach, it may still take weeks or months to arrange, for the stakes have been invested over years, indeed, a generation.

—MAX FRANKEL