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A Free Hand for What?

By TOM WICKER

Unless Le Duc Tho and Dr. Henry Kissinger are engaged in an incredible international hoax designed to get President Nixon re-elected, which not even cynical old Nixon-watchers are likely to believe, there probably are only two possible explanations for their repeated "secret" meetings, the last of which went on for four days.

One is that they are making slow but steady progress toward a negotiated settlement of the war. The other is that, having got within striking distance of such a settlement, close enough to keep them talking, they nevertheless have run into difficult final barriers.

Either way, and despite the continued American bombing of their cities and mining of their harbors, the North Vietnamese are still there, still meeting privately with Dr. Kissinger, obviously still talking. That is enough in itself to make these look like the most serious peace negotiations of the Nixon Administration.

This conclusion is supported by the fact that Hanoi now has the details of Senator George McGovern's peace plans. If Mr. McGovern should get a chance to implement those plans, they would certainly provide a better deal for the North Vietnamese than anything Mr. Nixon has publicly offered, or suggested he would accept.

Mr. Nixon, moreover, insisted at his last press conference that he would "never agree to a settlement which would impose a Communist government directly or indirectly on the people of South Vietnam" and that "the mining and the bombing will continue, of course, until we get some agreements on the negotiating front."

Coupled with his criticism of the

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bombing halt of 1968 "without adequate agreements from the other side," those statements seem to suggest that Mr. Nixon intends to rain death and destruction on North Vietnam until he gets an agreement that does not impose a Communist government in Saigon "directly or indirectly."

For what reason, then, is Hanoi continuing to take part in the Kissinger meetings, thus damaging Mr. McGovern's chances? And on what grounds can Mr. Nixon and Dr. Kissinger possibly convince the North Vietnamese that—as the President put it at his news conference—"waiting until after the election [to agree to a settlement] is not good strategy"?

One hypothesis is that Mr. Nixon is sure of victory in November, and that Hanoi shares his belief; therefore, Dr. Kissinger is telling Le Duc Tho that the McGovern plan is a mirage and that the North Vietnamese had better settle now before a possible landslide gives Mr. Nixon a free hand to toughen his terms and intensify the bombing attack on North Vietnam.

There are two troubles with that hypothesis. One is that the North Vietnamese "track record"—as Mr. Nixon might put it in his sports argot—is not one of the quailing before threats. The other is that, if Mr. Nixon is so sure of his re-election and the consequent free hand it would give him to win the war, there is no particular reason for him to offer or accept anything less in the last few weeks of the campaign; if he thinks he can put an end to the war on his own terms after the election, why compromise those terms before the elec-

Instead, it may well be that Mr. Nixon and Dr. Kissinger do not believe that winning the election, even by a landslide, will give the President a free hand to win the war. Probably nothing can.

Toughening Mr. Nixon's terms and trying to bomb the North Vietnamese into accepting them would be costly to the President in dollars and, despite all too much public apathy, in American and world reaction; even the supine Chinese and Russians at some point of violence might have to suspend their honeymoons with him. Such a course would not bring home the prisoners of war, but would make more of them. Above all, Mr. Nixon and Dr. Kissinger can hardly believe, after seven years of experience, that they can finally bomb the North Vietnamese into submission (into the Stone Age, perhaps, but not into submission) by any means they could justify. Trying to do so, in fact, is precisely what turned Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 landslide into futility and frustration.

If all that is so, Mr. Nixon may be seeking a free hand to settle the war, not to win it. For no matter what he says at a news conference, the truth is that any conceivable settlement is almost bound to threaten "directly or indirectly" a Communist government in Saigon, and probably could have been had as early as 1969, hundreds of thousands of deaths ago.

But any agreement before Nov. 7 surely would be greeted with initial enthusiasm and guarantee a Nixon landslide; and that would ratify even the kind of settlement the President has said he would not accept. And after his expected victory, of course, he would be immune to any public reaction for another four years.