



Behind the 'Secret' U.S.-Hanoi Talks

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THE WELL-PUBLICIZED "secret" negotiations between this country and North Vietnam are now on a knife edge of decision. The North Vietnamese Politburo must now be pictured as all but continuously locked in unending, agonizing and probably embittered debate, or at least this is true unless Dr. Kissinger's abrupt return to Paris means that the debate is over — in which case the outlook for an honorable settlement could be better than ever.

The subject of the debate should be obvious to anyone who reads the morning papers. The American terms were undoubtedly spelled out, in pretty full detail, during the extraordinary four-day meeting in Paris between Dr. Henry A. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. So Le Duc Tho has now gone back to Hanoi, to ask his fellow members of the Politburo whether they are ready to accept the American terms.

To this, it must be further added that to date, most speculation about the "secret" negotiations has been misguided, to put it mildly. On the one hand, it is being widely suggested that the President is about to give Hanoi almost all that Hanoi wants, with some "cosmetic" arrangements to make the deal look better in this country.

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ON THE other hand, it has also been suggested that a peace faction is now in the saddle in Hanoi, making acceptance of the American terms almost a foregone

conclusion. But one may confidently predict that this suggestion is nearly as incorrect as the kind more widely offered.

To begin with, no one beyond a very narrow circle knows precisely, what terms Dr. Kissinger has now spelled out for Le Duc Tho. But it can be assumed with certainty that President Nixon has gone no further than he did last January, at least in the area that matters most to the Hanoi leadership.

In other words, President Nixon has not agreed to destroy the present South Vietnamese government, or to pull the rug out from under President Thieu.

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THE TRUE COURSE of these negotiations may also be surmised with considerable certainty. Up to a certain point — say about mid-September — the North Vietnamese had only two objects: first, to keep their options open until they could judge the chances of their hero, Senator George McGovern; and second, to see whether President Nixon would give way under the pressure of the election. In both cases, the results must have been bitterly disappointing to Hanoi.

In the last month, therefore, the North Vietnamese object must have been to find out, in a practical, down-to-earth manner, the best terms they could get from the President. Beyond much doubt, they know these terms now. Hence the knife edge of decision in Hanoi.