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Peace Now: How Is It Different?

By Tom Wicker

Henry Kissinger has come home from Saigon amid thick rumors that a cease-fire in Vietnam is near, to be followed by a political settlement of the war. This has prompted George McGovern to say that he, for one, would "rejoice" if the war could be ended, "no matter the political impact."

So would every American, so much so that almost any kind of a settlement probably would provide whatever Mr. Nixon needs for a real landslide on Nov. 7. Many, in fact, will feel that "any kind of a settlement" would be justified in ending a war of such bloody excess, of such corrosive domestic impact, for such obscure or non-existent purposes.

But the Nixon Administration has never believed in making "any kind of a settlement" a condition for getting the war over. Instead, it has carried on the war for almost four years for the stated purposes of guaranteeing that the South Vietnamese should not have a Communist government "imposed" on them and that the anti-Communist regime in Saigon should have a "chance" to survive.

The cost of this policy has been immense, tragic, perhaps finally unbearable. It includes the following, at the least:

From 1969 through mid-1972, American planes dropped 3,632,722 tons of bombs on Indochina, more

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than were dropped in the years of the Johnson Administration, more than were dropped in World War II and the Korean War combined. Some of the worst devastation wrought by this wholly unprecedented assault has been upon South Vietnam, where B-52's with their area-saturation bombing patterns are routinely used for close ground support of South Vietnamese and American troops.

While the computer does not exist that could calculate the human cost of this terrible pounding—and of the offshore naval shelling and the napalm and the ground sweeps and the blind artillery fire and the Mylai massacres, known and unknown—civilian casualties in South Vietnam alone have been

estimated at a minimum of 525,000 from 1969 through May, 1972. Dead Asians in Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam are not included in this glorious body count, nor are the 20,000 yearly South Vietnamese Army deaths.

As for refugees, more than two million persons have been made homeless in Cambodia alone since 1970 and perhaps a million in South Vietnam this year. The North Vietnamese invasion had much to do with the latter figure, of course, but that invasion itself is a part of the price that had to be paid for carrying on the war throughout the Nixon Administration.

By contrast to these war costs levied on the Indochinese people, not least by Mr. Nixon's policy of carrying on the war, the cost to America has been small—only a little over 20,000 of her young men dead, plus 110,000 wounded, plus a military budget up from \$80 billion annually to a paltry \$86 billion, and possibly some small, vital part of her soul.

If all that—as well as the political conflict and the social alienation and the inattention to domestic crisis—is finally to be ended, every American should "rejoice" with Mr. McGovern, although there is no salvation in the mere cessation of what ought not to have been done; and even if cease-fires do not right wrongs but only suspend their commission.

But if all that really is to be ended, before or after the election, a heavy burden will lie on Mr. Nixon to show that the end has been in some way worth the means, even in his and Dr. Kissinger's balance-of-power perspective—let alone that any end whatever could justify such means in moral or human terms.

What, in the settlement that may be coming, is different from what could have been had in 1969, when Mr. Nixon took office with a promise to "end the war and win the peace"? What will be so different about the tri-partite government now under discussion and the one demanded for years by Hanoi and the Vietcong? If it is only the inclusion of General Thieu, rather than his exclusion, what makes that worth four years of brutal war?

Does this settlement really prevent a Communist government from being "imposed," or guarantee the anti-Communist regime a "chance" in some way not possible before? Does it merely provide the "interval" before a Communist takeover that Dr. Kissinger once cited as his goal? Or does any settlement available now include concessions that at least meet Mr. Nixon's own repeated conditions for peace, whatever may be thought of them?

To some Americans, no settlement can ever be worth the war that has been waged; surely Mr. Nixon owes it to all the others to show how a peace purchased at such cost is an improvement on what he could have had in the beginning.