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First Things First

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Oct. 24—The main point now in this sensitive phase of the Vietnam peace talks is to get as secure a cease-fire as possible, guaranteed by the United States, the Soviet Union and China, and then a long pause to give time for really careful and private negotiations. It will not be easy but it is the first priority.

A final settlement cannot be arranged now. Even an interim agreement to stop the fighting cannot be negotiated in the headlines of the world's press during the final days of an American election campaign, particularly if it is contingent on dozens of contradictory demands by Saigon and Hanoi, which will take months of hard bargaining to resolve.

The first thing is to stop the killing under conditions that will not give either General Thieu's South Vietnamese nationalists or the South Vietnamese Communists any special military advantage, and meanwhile to stop the flow of arms from Moscow and Peking to Hanoi and from the United States to Saigon.

Nothing in the recent lively phase of the negotiations suggests that this is yet in the cards, but Hanoi and Saigon are at least talking publicly about a cease-fire, and this recalls an offer President Nixon made on Oct. 12, 1970, when he seemed to realize, as others are doing now, that peace probably had to be negotiated, not all at once, but in stages.

A lot has happened since then in this tragic war, and in the relations between Washington and Moscow and Peking. What he offered then was not acceptable to Hanoi, and since Hanoi's latest military offensive has failed, maybe Mr. Nixon is no longer inter-

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ested in his cease-fire terms of 1970. But the principles he defined then may be worth recalling now.

"First," he said, "I propose that all armed forces throughout Indochina cease firing their weapons and remain in the positions they now hold. It would not in itself be an end to the conflict, but it would accomplish one goal all of us have been working toward: an end to the killing."

He asked that this cease-fire be supervised by North and South Viet-

nam and by international observers; that it forbid a build-up of arms on either side in all of Indochina; that it should cover all military activity, from bombing to terrorism; and finally, that this supervised cease-fire should be preliminary to negotiations for a final settlement of the war.

Also, he suggested that after a cease-fire he would accept a solution that reflected the "existing relationship of political forces" in the South Vietnamese countryside.

This was interpreted by the White House spokesman at that time as meaning that the Administration would be willing to stop the fighting and leave political control to the military forces in command of the territory they held.

In other words, if there was a military stalemate, there should be a political compromise on the control of territory. He did not say that a "cease-fire in place" should permit the organized North Vietnamese regiments and divisions, amounting now to 200,000 men, to remain in South Vietnam, and this is still one of the important unsettled questions.

In that proposal, President Nixon recognized the difficulties and dangers, which everybody is pointing out now in the changed circumstances of late 1972.

"A cease-fire in place would undoubtedly create a host of problems in its maintenance. But it's always easier to make war than to make a truce. To build an honorable peace, we must accept the challenge of long and difficult negotiations."

This obviously leaves out of account a whole thicket of demands and counter-demands by Saigon and Hanoi, but at some point in this tragedy there has to be a decision on priorities, and there is some evidence that the President is now putting pressure on both North and South Vietnam to agree to a controlled cease-fire, hold the balance of power, and give time for a careful and quiet settlement later on.

This could be wrong, for the American people have been left to judge what happened after Henry Kissinger's latest talks in Paris and Saigon by official statements, not by their own Government, but by the Governments of North and South Vietnam.

And it is also true that there are influential men around the President who are arguing that he doesn't need

a cease-fire before the election and will get a better settlement later on, and may even lose South Vietnam to the Communists if he makes an expedient political compromise now.

Well, nobody knows in this capital these days because—and this is the heart of the Washington problem—there is mistrust in the President because he trusts no man, even many of the men in his own official family.

Nevertheless, there is reason for believing that he is now pressing for a cease-fire, urging both Saigon and Hanoi to make compromises to end the killing, and leave the final settlement for later. If this is true, he deserves time to prove his point, for the main thing is to get this unspeakable war behind us and go on to the decent and honorable work of the Republic.