

Election Eve, 1968: Settlement Seemed a Real Possibility...

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Once again, on the eve of an American presidential election, Washington and Hanoi appear to be on the path toward a settlement of the Vietnam conflict.

Four years ago, almost to the day, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced the imminent cessation of all American "air, naval and artillery bombardment of North Vietnam" in an effort to promote progress at the Paris negotiations. The date was Oct. 31, 1968.

Yesterday at the White House the President's national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, announced that "we believe that peace is at hand. We believe that an agreement is within sight..." His announcement followed swiftly upon Hanoi's disclosure of a nine-point draft agreement for establishing a cease-fire and the framework of a political settlement.

Mr. Johnson's election eve effort to buoy hopes for a negotiated settlement (as well, perhaps, as the Democratic ticket) crumbled into a protracted deadlock at Paris and four more years of war at a cost of nearly 20,000 more American dead, \$54.5 billion in direct U.S. war expenditures and well over a million Vietnamese military and civilian casualties.

Democratic candidate George McGovern expressed what must have been a politically irresistible sense of *de ja vu* during an interview Sunday on the CBS program "Issues and Answers." Asked about reports of an imminent breakthrough on Vietnam during Kissinger's Saigon trip, McGovern said:

"My guess is that Mr. Kissinger is over there now trying to press some kind of a settlement on General Thieu like President Johnson was four years ago. We seem to be coming down to the closing days of another presidential campaign just like we were four years ago, with General Thieu blocking the path to peace..."

But historical parallels can be deceptive. Thieu and his Vice President, Nguyen Cao Ky, may well have sabotaged the prospects for an agreement at Paris under the auspices of the Johnson administration by their delaying antics over the shape and seating plan for the conference table. If the

object was to play for time and try to come to terms with the new Nixon administration, then the Saigon strategy worked.

Now, however, Thieu has considerably less prospect of getting satisfaction from a new McGovern administration than from President Nixon, whose general terms for Saigon were made public yesterday in Hanoi and Washington. Despite his repeatedly stated opposition to a standstill cease-fire and any suggestion of a coalition government, Thieu is now—unlike 1968—no longer in a position to shop for better terms.

Kissinger yesterday reiterated his belief that Saigon will endorse the draft cease-fire agreement, despite the "forcefulness" with which it stated its disagreements. In recent conversations with newsmen Kissinger intimated that the Nixon administration was prepared to risk an open rupture with Thieu if he were to resort to the sort of delaying tactics that proved so successful in 1968.

Four years ago this month the Johnson negotiating team, principally Averell Harriman and Cyrus Vance, were chafing publicly over the refusal of Saigon to enter substantive bargaining. Defense Secretary Clark M. Clifford became so impatient at the loss of precious negotiation time that he suggested the talks go ahead, whether or not Saigon joined them.

There were at the time more than half a million American troops in South Vietnam who were conducting the brunt of the war and who could not be extricated quickly without a great military debacle. Now there are fewer than 40,000 and the American war is being waged mainly from the sea and air. A U.S. ground presence has become, in military terms, almost marginal.

Nevertheless those who speak authoritatively for Thieu have insisted that when the cease-fire crunch came the official strategy would be to filibuster it. "We will be prepared to talk and talk about a cease-fire," an anonymous but key aide to Thieu avowed in a Saigon interview as far back as last July. In an allusion to the prolonged haggling in 1968 over the shape of the Paris conference table, it would be a case, he suggested jokingly, of "square cease-fire versus round cease-fire."

In dealing with the sensitive ques-

tion of whether the prospective draft agreement established the basis for a coalition government, Kissinger chose his words with exquisite care—presumably for Saigon's benefit. He did not say no.

"We do not consider this a coalition government," replied Kissinger, "and we believe that President Thieu was speaking about previous versions of a Communist plan... I think we all recognize the fact that political leaders speak to many audiences at the same time."

Yet the proposed National Council of Reconciliation and Concord, which would be created under the draft agreement, raises the specter that has long been deemed unthinkable in Saigon: legitimizing the existence of the Communists as a political movement in the South by allowing it a share of the decision-making power.

Thieu and leading members of his regime have repeatedly played for American public opinion with the argument that to legalize the Communist presence in South Vietnam would sew the seeds for political destruction of the anti-Communist government.

If the Nixon administration should prove McGovern wrong and win Thieu's acquiescence, then the Democrat will be left with only the politically pallid argument that peace could have been achieved four years ago.

Kissinger's answer to this yesterday was that until Oct. 8 the North Vietnamese were never willing to separate the military and political elements of a peace accord.

Whatever scant consolation it may be to McGovern, that is not quite true. In 1954 when the French and Vietminh were haggling over the outlines of the Geneva agreement, the solution was to appoint military working groups to iron out details of a cease-fire and, at separate meetings in Geneva, to draft the terms of a political settlement culminating in elections, that never were to be held, in 1956.

And on April 17, 1954, then Vice President Nixon told the American Society of Newspaper Editors during the Dienbienphu crisis that he hoped the United States would not have to send troops to Indochina. "But if this government cannot avoid it," he added, "the administration must face up to the situation."