

U.S. Threat to Saigon

Kissinger Statements Are Telling Thieu He Can No Longer Prevent U.S. Pullout

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 26—At a time of suspicions, fear and resentment on the path to truce in Vietnam, the White House today pronounced a veiled threat to Saigon and an unmistakable commitment to Hanoi that seal the bargain even before it is signed.

"Peace is at hand," Henry A. Kissinger could say — within "weeks or less" — because, as he put it, while Saigon's views deserve a

respectful hearing and some arrangements with Hanoi require clarification, "we cannot fail and we will not fail over what still remains to be accomplished."

That extraordinary pledge from a White House rostrum by the President's intimate adviser, chief negotiator and emissary extraordinary amounted to nothing less than an endorsement of the terms of settlement as now publicly defined, without quarrel, by the United States and North Vietnam.

At a time when Hanoi obviously fears that it is being swindled, that pledge served to reiterate the private undertakings that Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger offered in writing earlier this month.

And at a time when Saigon clearly fears that it is being abandoned, the pledge gave notice to President Nguyen Van Thieu that there was nothing he could hope to do to prevent agreement and American withdrawal.

Hanoi's Eye on U.S. Election

The fears in Hanoi obviously relate to the timing of the American Presidential election on Nov. 7. In offering President Nixon a final signing on Oct. 31, the North Vietnamese were offering a climactic week of peace headlines in the closing week of the campaign and were seeking assurances that no objections in Saigon and no second thoughts in Washington would offset that balance of interests.

When Mr. Kissinger, mired in discussions with President Thieu in Saigon last week, asked for the third delay in two weeks — one that would carry beyond Nov. 7—the men in Hanoi gave way to a decade of mistrust and suspected the worst. They published the draft agreement and the record of Washington's delays, hoping either to provoke a Presidential reaffirmation of the accord or to create two weeks of the most embarrassing possible headlines here.

Thus no matter how much the White House protests that the President never gave the election and the headlines a second thought, Hanoi never lost sight of his predicament, or of the lessons of its bargaining with another American Administration four years ago at this time.

And Hanoi succeeded in provoking both a pledge that the agreement stands and a new wave of pressure on President Thieu to acquiesce.

Solace to the South

There was no mistaking Mr. Kissinger's double purpose, once he had had been forced into a public accounting. Just one more meeting with the North Vietnamese will resolve all his problems with the accord, he said; those problems "can be easily settled," he will meet anytime, anywhere; Hanoi deserves sympathy for its "honest misunderstanding" of his delaying tactics; there will be no more.

To the South Vietnamese, he offered mostly solace. They had fought hard and deserve to be consulted on their own peace treaty, he said; they may sign it as they now seem to wish; they have raised some valid point that pose no obstacles, and other objections with which he disagrees; it was always "clear" that he needed some time for them but "we will make our own decisions as to how long we believe a war should be continued."

In fact, he went on to explain, Hanoi can now make the decision by scheduling one more meeting of a few days.

As Mr. Kissinger identified them, the remaining difficulties seemed secondary indeed. Some dealt with the timing of a cease-fire and the emplacement of supervisors. Some dealt with translation problems. One dealt with the unofficial comments of Premier Pham Van Dong of North Vietnam.

A Delay Useful to Some

Implicitly, Mr. Kissinger acknowledged undue haste on his part in the drafting and acceptance of the proposed agreement. For instance, a subsequent round of "explanation" seems to have been needed to make sure that American prisoners of war would be released well before the Saigon Government agreed to release its political prisoners. At the final session, the Americans will want some further guarantees against last-minute fighting and grabbing of territory before the division of the country into zones of rival administration.

Moreover, President Thieu seems to be using the current delay to prepare his forces for disputed claims of sovereignty, and the Pentagon is using the

delay to accelerate arms shipments that will be forbidden under the cease-fire.

There is enough going on now and enough vagueness in the agreement itself to cause endless trouble in the weeks and months to come, including long and difficult political negotiations in South Vietnam, disputes over territory and populations and appointments, over the prerogatives of the rival administrations, rival recruitment for military service, rival taxes and fundamental violations of the cease-fire and the rules forbidding military reinforcement.

But all these risks, including the real risk of protracted terror and guerrilla warfare, have now been discontinued here as the impending bargain is adjudged as the fairest possible for the foreseeable future.

Political Contest Still On

The essential concession from Hanoi in this accord, both sides agree, is the agreement to begin with a concrete military standstill and to continue the political contest in South Vietnam under arrangements still to be negotiated.

As Mr. Kissinger emphasized, President Thieu will be free to marshal his forces to wage that contest and will be limited only by "some very general principles" in the basic agreement. For instance, Mr. Kissinger noted, the Saigon Government and the Vietcong are pledged to "do their utmost" to settle internal matters within three months, not that they must do so within three months.

Indeed, the expectation here is that the division of authority, the restoration of government services and the creation of a new political system inside South Vietnam may take many months longer and some questions may not be resolved for years. The situation is far more complex than that of Laos at the time of cease-fire there in 1962. The feelings run much deeper, the stakes are larger and rival forces are not nearly so neatly aligned in contiguous regions. And yet the rival Laoian princes never achieved anything better than de facto partition of their country.

Since South Vietnam cannot be logically partitioned into workable segments, and with a powerful North Vietnam so interested in the outcome of the political struggle, no one here doubts that Mr. Thieu and his supporters face a long period of challenge and uncertainty.

Nixon's Key Concession

The key concession to Hanoi in return was President Nixon's willingness, despite his uncertainty, to let 145,000 North Vietnamese troops remain in South Vietnam in clearly defined and legal enclaves to support a Vietcong political effort that has always appeared more skillful than that of its adversaries.

Without risks on each side, however, no one in Washington ever imagined a plausible settlement that could survive even for a month. Mr. Nixon's satisfaction is that he refused, for four long years, to collaborate in the outright destruction of the Thieu Government or in any other arrangement assuring a Vietcong political triumph.

His critics, including Senator George McGovern, the Democratic candidate, contend that something very similar could have been achieved long ago. It is not an argument that will be settled soon in a country that was rent by the war almost as much as the Vietnam whose division it struggled to preserve.