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The End Of The Tunnel

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Oct. 26—How did it happen? And what remains to be settled before a cease-fire in Vietnam? These are the questions now being discussed here at the end of the long dark tunnel.

Four factors seem to have broken the stalemate:

¶President Nixon's decision of last May 8 to break the Communist offensive by mining Haiphong harbor, and committing his aircraft carriers and B-52's to the battle.

¶His compromise offer on that same day to "stop all acts of force throughout Indochina" and withdraw "all American forces from Vietnam within four months," provided all prisoners of war were released and an internationally supervised cease-fire had begun.

¶The decision of the Soviet Union and China to tolerate the President's military counteroffensive and, after the successful defense of South Vietnam by Saigon's army and American air power, to urge Hanoi and the South Vietnamese Communists to accept Mr. Nixon's compromise.

¶The defeat of Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap's "total victory" faction in the Hanoi Politburo, after the failure of the Communist Easter drive, by the reconstruction faction that feared continuation of the war would not capture South Vietnam but might destroy North Vietnam.

There will, of course, be endless arguments about whether peace could have come years ago, if, as the hawks believe, there had been more bombing or, as the doves insist, more willingness to compromise in the last years of the Johnson Administration or the first years of the Nixon. But so far as this last decisive phase of the long tragedy is concerned, it was undoubtedly the combination of power and compromise that broke the Communist

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offensive, and, with the restraint of Moscow and Peking, persuaded Hanoi that it had more to lose by continuing the battle than by compromising.

It has been a long time since Washington has heard such a candid and even brilliant explanation of an intricate political problem as Henry Kissinger gave to the press on the peace negotiations.

He was precise and generous to all parties concerned, understanding of Hanoi's eagerness to sign the truce within the next few days, sympathetic to Saigon's desire to be a party to the settlement of a war fought on its own territory, conscious of the terrible dangers of ambiguity in the language of the hurriedly drafted truce agreement, but firm in his insistence on ending the war on terms that would minimize the killing during the transition from war to peace.

"We will not be stampeded into an agreement until its provisions are right," he said in a statement that was obviously intended for Hanoi. "And," he added, aimed at Saigon, "we will not be deflected from an agreement when its provisions are right."

There is reason for saying that Kissinger meant by this that the United States will not give General Thieu in Saigon a veto over the truce agreement, but at the same time won't be hurried into signing an agreement that leaves important details unsettled.

For example, it is not clear in the draft agreement as now written where the North Vietnamese troops will go after they leave Cambodia and Laos—whether into North Vietnam or South Vietnam. This is not unimportant.

Nor is it clear that the international force to supervise the cease-fire will be in place and operating effectively at the moment of the cease-fire, for if it isn't, the temptation to scramble for territory at great loss of life may be unavoidable on both sides.

Also, there is an important ambiguity—maybe it is only a misunderstanding between the Vietnamese and English language translations—on the question of whether the proposed National Council of Reconciliation, which is to help arrange the final political settlement between the North and South, is to be merely an "administrative structure"—as it appears in the English translation—or maybe some kind of new coalition government structure, as it could be interpreted in the Vietnamese language.

Fortunately, at the end of his four-day meeting with the Communists in Paris, which broke the stalemate, Dr. Kissinger had a long philosophic talk with Le Duc Tho in which they agreed to defend the principles of their agreement and not allow technicalities to prevent the movement, not only to a cease-fire but to reconciliation and the reconstruction of Vietnam.

Accordingly, while Hanoi has known since last Sunday night that the United States wanted another meeting to clarify these important details and has not yet answered or agreed to such a meeting, Dr. Kissinger is confident that Hanoi will agree to talk again and that the differences can be settled both with Hanoi and Saigon.

He does not exclude the possibility of a troubled and even angry delay, but is confident that the truce will be signed at least before the end of November, and if this proves to be true, the efforts of Dr. Kissinger in these last few months will make one of the most intriguing chapters in the long and chequered history of American diplomacy.