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A Famous Victory

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By Anthony Lewis

LOS ANGELES, Oct. 27 — In a strange election, this must have been the strangest moment: George McGovern about to leave Detroit for his day of campaigning, and suddenly the accompanying press hears that Henry Kissinger is talking on television about peace in Vietnam. Everyone piles out of the buses to watch in the cocktail lounge of a Howard Johnson's motel.

Watching, it was as if the real campaign were there in the White House briefing room—and Henry Kissinger the candidate. His account of the Vietnam negotiations was professionally masterful; it was also a skilled political performance. Here was a White House foreign affairs adviser promising "an act of healing" for domestic "anguish" over the war, and ending with a political peroration: "We believe that we can restore both peace and unity to America very soon."

But after all the suffering and heartache, domestic politics is unimportant compared to an end of this war—especially, for us, of America's role in it. As to that, the Kissinger statement and other events of the last few days have made a number of things clearer.

There is going to be a cease-fire: Kissinger's confidence about that is based solidly on the logic of the situation. President Nixon, having come this far, can hardly be seen to let peace slip away. Having at last engaged in a test of wills with his Saigon allies, he cannot afford to lose that contest.

Nguyen Van Thieu, for his part, prefers as always to have the United States go on bombing his own country and the other three states of Indochina until the last Communist is dead. But his leverage is limited. Four years ago he could deal from strength with President Johnson and candidate Humphrey because he had an alternative—Richard Nixon. This time he has no place else to go.

There was no comfort for Thieu in Kissinger's words. He said Saigon's views "deserve great respect." But he made clear that the South Vietnamese

As for Hanoi, its interest would also seem to lie in an early conclusion of the terms. It must have sought a timetable ending Oct. 31, as Kissinger disclosed, because it thought President Nixon was going to be re-elected and correctly believed that he would have the strongest motivation to put pressure on Saigon before Nov. 7. That is still the case.

The terms disclosed in Hanoi and Washington still leave fundamental questions completely up in the air: What will be the relationship between the Thieu Government and the new Council of National Reconciliation? How can the council conceivably operate under the proposed rule of unanimity? Who will really control the ground as attempts at a political settlement are made during the cease-fire? Who will control the police in South Vietnam?

Uncertainties of that kind were probably always going to be present in anything that passed for a negotiated settlement in Vietnam. Their existence now serves to emphasize the doubtful rationality—to put it mildly—of what the Nixon Administration has done over the last four years to obtain these particular terms.

It is true enough, as Kissinger said, that Hanoi has changed its position: It has agreed to separate military and political questions. But we have accepted a continued North Vietnamese presence in the south, and coalition of a sort. Will the substantive result for South Vietnam be meaningfully different from what might have happened if the United States in 1969 had simply announced its intention to end its part of the war in six months?

The cease-fire, with each side holding its territory in South Vietnam, could turn out to be the de facto political settlement if agreement on elections and administration proves impossible. Instead of having one coalition government of doubtful prospects, as the other side had always proposed, South Vietnam would then be a hodgepodge of territories governed by two authoritarian groups. From the viewpoint of the Vietnamese, would that be an improvement?

No one can say with assurance how the terms now proposed differ from what could have been obtained if President Nixon had moved boldly for peace in 1969. But any difference has been immensely outweighed by the cost of what the President has done in the four years—the cost to the people of Indochina and America.

Peace is more important than the particulars, and no one should niggle as it comes. But that has always been true. And the United States will not be at peace with itself until it recognizes the obsessive futility, the dishonor, of what it has done in the pursuit of particular terms in Vietnam.

A few years from now it is extremely unlikely that anyone except some scholars will be able to understand what it was that the United States gained by four more years of mass destruction. We shall look back at it all like the characters in Robert Southey's poem, "The Battle of Blenheim."

"But what good came of it at last?"

Quoth Little Peterkin.

"Why that I cannot tell," said he;

"But 'twas a famous victory."

ABROAD AT HOME

had not been informed during the crucial period of negotiation with Hanoi, and said coldly: "We will make our own decisions as to how long we believe a war should be continued."