



Joseph Kraft

Post 10/31/72

The Vietnam Accord

In judging the Vietnam settlement now at hand, it is useful to examine two sets of rival claims. One has been put forward by the administration; the other by those close to Sen. McGovern. And by a circumstance that would be curious on any issue except Vietnam, both are probably right.

The administration claim, broached publicly by journalists pleased to play dictaphone to Henry Kissinger, is that through a nice mixture of diplomatic and military pressure the President and his chief aide forced Hanoi to accept American terms for political settlement. In fact, overwhelming evidence can be marshaled to sustain that claim.

Enormous pressure was applied. The mining of harbors and the resumption of the bombing in May clearly had something to do with stopping Hanoi's spring offensive.

I am not persuaded by speculative reports of an internal feud in the North Vietnamese Politburo. But pressure from other Communist states was brought to bear in June when a plenum of the North Vietnamese Central Committee seems to have been held.

President Nikolai Podgorny came from Russia at that time. An aid agreement with China hung fire for weeks during the same period. My guess is that the Communist decision to come to terms was made sometime in June.

When the agreement was finally cut in October, Hanoi did yield on the major political issue. The North Vietnamese had fought the war to achieve a friendly regime in Saigon, and their preferred bridge to that end was a coalition government composed of South Vietnamese nationalists, Communists and neutral parties.

THEY HAVE accepted instead a process dependent on a tripartite Commission of Reconciliation set up to prepare elections. The commission, made up of persons nominated by the Saigon regime and the Communists, can make decisions only by

unanimous vote. Thus, as a vehicle for their principle political objective, the Communists have accepted an instrument that cannot work, a formula for failure. They have taken the figleaf.

By contrast, President Nixon and Dr. Kissinger have achieved what hardly anybody believed was possible—a lease on life for President Thieu of South Vietnam. They did it first by playing Russia off against China, and then playing China and Russia off against North Vietnam. That they are now playing Hanoi against Saigon to win over President Thieu shows how much they have proved masters of the diplomat9c game.

TR FOR ADD ONE

But their undoubted achievement is to some extent unsaid by the claim of the administration opponents. I mean the claim that what has been gained in the settlement does not justify the cost paid over the past four years.

CONSIDERED outside the narrow calculus of the bargaining history, the overall gain for American interests is slight indeed. President Thieu, to be sure, has a chance to survive. But how much is President Thieu's survival worth in Peoria?

Moreover, the chance to survive is not very good. The Communists now have a legitimate legal and military foothold in South Vietnam. Developments in that country are probably going to move toward reconstruction. In that atmosphere the Thieu regime, and its vast apparatus of military and police control, is probably going to prove irrelevant.

Set against these "gains," the cost paid out over the past four years is enormous. Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians have been killed. Twenty thousand Americans have lost their lives.

Billions of dollars worth of damage has been done—for which this country will pay in a reconstruction program. And there is the fathomless harm done by the continuing war to the fabric

of unity in this country and the national self-confidence.

So it is not clear that the game played so brilliantly by the President and Dr. Kissinger was really worth the candle. On the contrary, many Americans can plausibly feel that the national interest would have been far better served by settling the war—even on less favorable political terms—back in 1969.

What all this means is that drawing a balance between the two claims is like squaring the circle. No final resolution is possible. Those who are truly interested in binding up the nation's wounds will drop their claims and draw over the past a decent veil of oblivion.

© 1972, Publishers-Hall Syndicate