

Letters to the Editor

Terms Being Offered to Hanoi

To the Editor:

All sincere opponents of the war in Indochina can only rejoice at the prospect that at long last it is coming to an end, or at least to another extended pause, as in 1954.

In these circumstances it is natural for the Administration to seek to extract the maximum political benefit. When those efforts involve distortion of the record, however, it is important both for the sake of history and the choice voters will be making on Nov. 7 to point it out.

Henry Kissinger says that the North Vietnamese proposal on Oct. 8 that the U.S. and Hanoi should concentrate in the first instance on bringing an end to the military aspects of the war "was exactly the position which we had always taken." At a very high level of generality the statement may be true. But the implication that Hanoi has finally agreed to the basic terms which the Nixon Administration has always offered simply won't wash.

In fact, President Nixon's terms for settling the military aspects of the war have been a long time getting to where they are today. Throughout 1969 and most of 1970 President Nixon manifested no interest in a cease-fire that was not tied to the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops.

It was not until October 1970, 21 months after assuming office, that he offered an in-place cease-fire. And it was not until May 1971 that the Ad-

ministration offered, in addition to a cease-fire, to withdraw American forces in return for a release of prisoners of war.

This was also the season when the Administration, now for the first time closer to the time of the next election than to the previous one, stepped up its efforts in the SALT talks, responded to Chinese overtures and moved toward wage and price controls.

No one can say for sure whether President Nixon could have secured a cease-fire during the first two years of his Administration if he had offered then the terms he is now willing to accept. The point is he didn't try. One is tempted to conclude that the pressure of an approaching election has something to do with the distance he is willing to move from original positions.

Evidently the North Vietnamese have assimilated this lesson. They are apparently enough concerned with the unpredictability of a President Nixon freed for the first time in his life of the discipline of electoral accountability, to press frantically for his signature on the dotted line before the November elections. One wonders if the American people have learned the same lesson.

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