

NOV 2 1972

The Peace Agreement Moratorium On "I-Told-You-So"

By Kenneth Crawford

NOTHING WOULD be as becoming to disputants on the Vietnam war at this point as a decent humility. Events have proved both sides spectacularly wrong. The proof of this is the peace agreement now in short-term prospect.

Nobody emerges from the 10-year debate with laurels for prescience. Nobody was anywhere near right about what would eventuate, except President Nixon and Henry Kissinger, who had the power, the resolution and the skill to make things happen their way—and brought it off. They appear to have negotiated a viable settlement, something both the hawks and doves, the hard-liners and war critics, for differing reasons, considered impossible—at least impossible unless the President and his foreign-policy adviser and executor adopted policies other than those they were pursuing. What they used was a combination of detente diplomacy in Moscow and Peking and hard-nosed military pressure in Vietnam.

Some critics thought their methods too soft and others thought them too cruel—Hitlerite in George McGovern's frame of reference.

THE HARD-LINERS, although discredited by their premature sightings of light at the end of the tunnel, nevertheless made known their conviction that a war that couldn't be won by a lavishly equipped U.S. expeditionary force of more than a half million Americans certainly couldn't be brought to an honorable or even face-saving conclusion by withdrawing that force. Their logic seemed impeccable.

The war critics, increasingly confident of their wisdom and essential morality as the war dragged on—apparently unwinnable and more devastatingly unpopular every day—perceived nothing but folly in the administration's tactics and strategy. The South Vietnamese army would never fight. Why should it? All it had to fight for was "the corrupt Thieu dictatorship."

U.S. air and sea power, uncoordinated with U.S. ground operations, would be totally ineffective. The resourcefulness and dedication of the disciplined North would find, indeed was finding, ways of beating the blockade. The whole thing was hopeless. Why not just abandon Saigon and write off the adventure to tragic experience?

But the South Vietnamese army did fight. It fought off the Tet offensive with American help on the ground and in the air and the more recent invasion through the Demilitarized Zone with a minimum of American ground support but even more help from the air. The American air and sea blockades, though they didn't cut off all reinforcement from the North, were effective enough. Vietnamization proved itself. It didn't prevent

infiltration but it saved the more populated areas of the South from Communist domination.

IN THE END it was the North Vietnamese who blinked. Under siege from air and sea, under pressure from their Chinese and Russian allies to compromise, divided in their own councils, they finally, in early October, entered into serious negotiations for the first time, abandoning their demands for withdrawal of all American personnel, agreement by the U.S. not to resupply the South and overthrow of the Thieu government as preconditions to discussion of peace terms. Kissinger was ready, willing and able.

Perhaps the Communists are as cynical about international agreements as they were when they tore up the Yalta accords to overrun Eastern Europe. Perhaps they intend to force South Vietnam to go the way of Poland, once U.S. arms are withdrawn. Perhaps, feeling that they were done out of the election promised them in the Geneva agreement of 1954, they are as wary of capitalist commitments as dedicated capitalists are of theirs.

A determined political contest for control of South Vietnam between Hanoi's allies in the South and the Saigon government is inevitable. It will be disorderly. It may get violent. The conditions for an election provided in the Kissinger-Hanoi accord would seem to guarantee no election, at least for a long time. Even so, the agreement, if there is as much as a trace element of good will on both sides, would seem to have a chance of restoring a semblance of peaceful order to the battered territory of South Vietnam.

Thieu has an army of a million men to safeguard his people from repetitions of the Hue massacre. His military equipment can be replaced by the U.S. as it wears out. The North is permitted to leave its force of about 140,000 infiltrators, or some part of it, in place in the South. The North's indigulous allies are to be free to engage openly in politics. War weariness on both sides should be conducive to peaceful settlement of differences.

IT IS PROBABLY too much to hope that hawks and doves in this country will observe the process of reconciliation with enough restraint to give the parties immediately concerned a chance to do their own thing. The war critics especially, having become accustomed to a luxurious sense of omniscience and righteousness, can't be expected to quit their moralizing cold turkey. Thus they must be excused for contending that the same agreement Kissinger has now made could have been negotiated immediately after Tet, overwhelming evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.

There isn't much harm in such an exercise, in fanciful smoke blowing if, as Adlai Stevenson put it, the smokers don't inhale. And if, after reviewing several times more the cost in lives, treasure and home morale of the Vietnam war, they recognize that what is past is past and that it may possibly be prologue to a future that is not quite doom.

Nobody outside the innercircle of the Nixon administration is in a position to say: "I told you so." It would do no harm if participants in the war debate would acknowledge as much, but this won't happen. Nobody is more tedious than an I-told-you-soer, not even one whose boast is justified. Even the Nixonites would do well to bear this in mind.