

# Negotiating Vietnam's Future

By Richard Holbrooke

THE REMARKABLE events in Vietnam in the last two weeks should be considered at at least three different levels if they are to be understood and evaluated. Otherwise, there is a considerable danger that one can get quite lost in the debate which is bound to grow around what has, and has not, been accomplished by Nixon administration.

First of all—and in my opinion by far most important—Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho have finally worked out a formula which permits the United States to end its

*The writer is managing editor of Foreign Policy and was a member of the U.S. delegation at the Paris peace talks in 1968-69.*

involvement in the war in Vietnam. After more than a decade of agony and tragedy in a war we should not have been involved in, we have found a way out which is acceptable to our government and the government of North Vietnam. There can be honest debate about whether this could have been achieved earlier (I believe that it could have been), or whether it was worth the additional costs to pursue the war longer while waiting for the concessions that Hanoi finally made in October of 1972 (I believe that it was not worth it). But the one, overriding fact is that the way out of the war is now determined, as a result of a brilliant negotiation in which both sides made important concessions. There are some serious obstacles still ahead before we actually are out of Vietnam, but the significant point here is that those obstacles lie far more with Saigon and Nguyen

But barring those grim possibilities, the nightmare may soon be over—for America.

Having rejoiced over that hope, we must now recognize that what Mr. Kissinger and Mr. Tho negotiated in Paris was not an end to the war in Indochina. The central issues of the war, over which various Indochinese have fought for more than two decades, were not resolved in the famous secret talks. On the contrary, Tho and Kissinger—presumably each recognizing that a military solution was beyond the means of their respective sides—simply agreed to leave unresolved the issue over which the whole war was fought: control of the government and people of South Vietnam. In this respect,

the United States made a major concession by permitting the North Vietnamese to retain their forces (some reports say merely the bulk of their forces) in South Vietnam. Presumably the presence of North Vietnamese regulars within South Vietnam will have a substantial effect on the political future of the country.

And so, if the scenario that Mr. Kissinger outlined is followed, we will leave, the North Vietnamese will stay, and then—believe it or not—the contending parties, who have fought each other since they were formed, will sit down and work things out, through a series of mixed electoral and military commissions. The most important group, which may or may not be called the National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord, will operate on the basis of unanimity among its three factions.

That seems highly unlikely. Too much distrust and hatred, too many battles and betrayals, too much murder and blood on everyone's hands. Maybe reasonable men can agree, but can people who feel—perhaps correctly—that their survival is literally at stake figure out a way to live together and share power?

It is a gloomy prediction, and I hope it is wrong, but it seems probable that the situation will not stabilize in Saigon for a long time, and that the Viet Cong and the militant anti-Communist factions will each seek continually every small advantage over the other. It is not hard to foresee a situation in which gradually the political bickering turns back into political assassination by both sides, then perhaps to minor skirmishing. One can only hope that this will not happen, but on the past record in Indochina it is all too possible.

And this leads directly back to the United States and to the third level at which one should consider the events of the last month. What will the United States do if the Communists and the anti-Communists cannot agree to settle their differences peacefully, if the talk turns back to subversion and then perhaps to fighting? What if the North Vietnamese do not keep their part of the bargain?

The widely-held consensus in the United States today is that once we are out, nothing will ever get us back in. This would seem to be the correct answer, for our capacity to control events in Indochina has always been limited (although our influence has been large) and our national interests, whatever they are, are not wrapped up in the outcome of the deliberations of a National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord. With the President's brilliant opening of China, the last remaining rationale for the commitment in Vietnam, even for those who still held it, should have disappeared. If all we were fighting for in recent years was our "national honor," and if the administration can now claim that this objective has been achieved, then that too can be definitively eliminated.

And so one must hope and believe that the first level of understanding remains the dominant one—and that events at the second level, in Saigon, do not in any way lure us back into the quagmire. Reason would suggest strongly that this will in fact be the case. But in the past, reason has not always ruled in Indochina, and it would not be a bad idea to remain alert to the dangers—and to the need for restraint and detachment—that future chaos in Saigon could pose to American policy-makers in Washington.



"Tell Me I'm Dreaming . . ."

van Thieu than with Hanoi and Pham Van Dong.

In the long history of the war, Hanoi did not yield on certain central points—separating the military and political issues, and permitting some role post-cease fire for Thieu being the most important—until October 1972. That they might have made these concessions earlier must at this moment be secondary to the fact that they were finally made, and that in turn the United States made some crucial modifications of its position.

As of today, unfortunately, the war still goes on—despite Henry Kissinger's hopeful prediction that "peace is at hand." Another disaster, so much in keeping with the whole tragic course of the war, is still all too possible. Thieu might find a way to stop the agreements, as he has done before; Hanoi and Washington might find themselves unable to regain their previous negotiating momentum as both sides send massive military reinforcements and supplies into South Vietnam; the mutual trust is essential to a negotiation which might disappear amid nasty public recriminations on both sides.