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# Why the Date Was Wrong

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THIS COLUMN has misled its readers so often with the prediction that there would be peace in Vietnam before the election, that it owes them an apology and an explanation from which they might, perhaps, learn something about a columnist's work that does not usually appear on the surface.

From the first months of the year, when I began saying that a peace deal was on the way, to the mid-July column which professed to explain why "the ending of the war before the presidential election" was assured, I was engaged in constant debate with most other journalists and experts who were saying the opposite.

But a columnist engages primarily in direct discourse with the general reader, trying to persuade him, sometimes several times a week, to change his mind about some of the most important things that are happening in the world. The writer thus develops a relationship with the reader that is none the less intimate for being distant.

The columnist, therefore, owes it to the reader to alert him to those flaws in his column which may not be apparent at a distance. One such flaw in my approach is intellectual pugnacity which sometimes causes me to respond to a challenge by raising the stakes. It is a quality that may be easily disguised, and possibly sometimes has been in my column, by the semblance of rational argument. It is certainly something that readers should be aware of, lest they be swept to a conclusion by a writer's rhetoric.

BUT IT WOULD BE equally misleading to suggest that this is all there is to it. The unanimous skepticism which greeted the columns that pointed to an impending settlement made me extend my analysis in the depth and in breadth, from Moscow to Peking, from Washington to Hanoi, and back to Saigon. This made it possible to point to straws that can now be seen to have shown which way the wind was blowing. But while the thrust of the analysis may have been right, the date was wrong. Why?

A discussion of the evidence might teach us some-

thing about how these decisions about war and peace are made, but this must still wait upon events. For the present, we must learn from our mistakes. One lesson is to be learned from those of my columns which discussed President Thieu's objections to an agreement long before its existence was disclosed.

FROM SAIGON, the veiled criticism of the accord made it possible to deduce—when viewed together with other evidence—the basic elements of the agreement whose existence the White House was blandly denying. From Hanoi, the signs made it possible to conclude that an agreement had been virtually reached—as we now know it had—again in the face of White House denials. But the analysis came unstuck when it rushed to the conclusion that the Nixon-Kissinger combination could not be outwitted by a man like Thieu.

This column claimed that Thieu's early complaints about a sell-out by "colonialists" were addressed to Mr. Nixon. Administration officials replied that Thieu's remarks were really aimed at France. The column interpreted Thieu's remarks as a threat to Mr. Nixon's election plans. But Mr. Nixon and Kissinger did not believe that Thieu would act as "irrationally" as this, because it was clear that they would be able to punish him after the election.

They had, therefore, negotiated in good faith an agreement which was to be signed formally a week before the election. When they saw they had underestimated Thieu's capacity for brinkmanship, they pulled back at the last moment. So they had erred—and I compounded their error. And I made the additional mistake of overestimating Mr. Nixon's willingness to take political risks—however slight they might seem—on the eve of an election.

After a career devoted to Kremlinology and China-watching, I have lately arrived in Washington to add the White House to my objects of study, and to write a column that encompasses all three. What I have learned in this exercise should protect me from some errors. But I will make others.

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