

Skirted Peace Showdown to Avoid Election

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President Nixon pulled back. The current edition of the extremely conservative Washington weekly, *Human Events*, for example contends that Kissinger tried "to forest" the final accord on Mr. Nixon, provoking "a bitter dispute among top officials involved in the negotiations and that even the White House has been having serious second thoughts about the tentative provisions."

No direct comment was available immediately from the White House, but officials there earlier this week scoffed at rumors that there was a breach between the President and Kissinger. All the President's statements about the negotiations, informed sources said, have been processed through Kissinger's office.

In effect, this is a continuing part of the "three-way search process" between Washington, Hanoi and Saigon.

The long delay in bringing the originally negotiated agreement into force, and the suspicions being aired with increasing openness by North Vietnam that it was tricked, automatically raise questions about whether the "stretching" operation now going on will snap—collapsing the agreement.

The Human Events report describes the tentative accord as "a catastrophe." There is no public sign whatever that this is the President's attitude toward it. On the contrary, the President has been at least as effusive as Kissinger about the intended agreement, hailing it as one of the administrator's greatest accomplishments, even though both stress that revisions are required to improve it to the point where the United States is prepared to sign it.

High-level administration sources say they believe this will not happen, because the imperfections in the accord are "manageable" and both Washington and Hanoi, in private communications, are registering a desire to succeed.

No party in the secret negotiations has approached full candor about its role and there is no reason to conclude that any presently available version of what happened is wholly accurate. Each side has seen engaged in a combination of secret and public diplomacy intertwined with psychological and political warfare while the war in Vietnam continues.

Haig was last in Saigon Sept. 29-Oct. 4, just prior to the last round of secret talks between Kissinger and Tho. Both sides have said that it was on Oct. 8 that North Vietnam formally "asks the 'breakthrough' offer in the negotiating salernate, to which the United States immediately responded the next day Kissinger went to Saigon on Oct. 18, from Paris, for what is now described as an attempt to "stretch" President Thieu's position toward the draft terms.

President Nixon told a press conference on Oct. 5 that "under no circumstances will the timing of a settlement" of the war, including a ceasefire or a bombing halt, "be affected by the fact that there is going to be an election Nov. 7."

Unofficial claims are now circulating that Kissinger pressed beyond President Nixon's intentions in his attempt to induce South Vietnam to shift its demands enough to produce an agreement by Oct. 31 and that

until after the election is not good strategy."

In other words, the President was saying that it was North Vietnam, not the United States, that was operating on the American election timetable.

The United States, in fact, had sent numerous warnings to North Vietnam, through the Soviet Union and other nations, that President Nixon was a sure prospect for reelection and that when that occurred, he would not only be less inclined to compromise on peace terms but North Vietnam would face mounting military punishment. Speculation that a cease-

fire and a war settlement were imminent began to soar in September, when Kissinger and Le Duc Tho had an unusual two-day secret meeting, followed by their conclusive Oct. 8-11 talks in Paris. North Vietnam, in taking what it called "a new, extremely important initiative" to end the war, proposed that the United States and North Vietnam sign it "by mid-October, 1972."

Hanoi said the first "agreed" timetable provided for a U.S. halt in the bombing of North Vietnam on Oct. 18, including the document in Hanoi on Oct. 19, and signing it in Paris on Oct. 26. These dates continued to slip, through counter-proposals on the U.S. side, until an ultimate set of action dates for the same sequences on Oct. 23, Oct. 24, and the Oct. 31 signing.

The final set of dates was confirmed, Hanoi has said in a series of letters from President Nixon to Premier Pham Van Dong, culminating in an Oct. 20 letter in which President Nixon reportedly wrote, "The text of the agreement can now be considered complete."

No full text of any of these exchanges has been made public. U.S. officials claim that Hanoi's quotations are "highly selective."

On Oct. 18, the day Kissinger arrived in Saigon, Pham Van Dong gave an interview to Newsweek correspondent Arnaud de Borchgrave, who had been invited to Hanoi, evidently for that explicit purpose. In the interview, the premier said he believed the end of the war was at hand, and projected part of the secret agreement.

He apparently gave the interview to portray his version of the anticipated accord, and perhaps also to put on the public record a version of it to try to assure its completion.