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The Paris Talks Conform to Ritual, But Occasionally There Is a Smile

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PARIS, Nov. 9—The North Vietnamese delegate, a slight man with a heavy overcoat and black-rimmed glasses, stepped quickly up to the microphones on the sidewalk outside the Hotel Majestic. He said a few words, went in, came out three hours later and said a few words more.

The Vietcong representative brushed silently by on the way in but said something as she emerged.

William J. Porter of the United States arrived, sailed up to the microphones and told the cameramen that he felt particularly good this morning and hoped they did. He made a statement.

"The American delegation is very much invigorated by the President's massive victory and by the endorsement it carries with it for his Vietnam and other policies," said Mr. Porter, the chief delegate. He added that peace was coming closer, and went inside.

When he came out he smiled slightly, said nothing and went to his car. One of his staff appeared. "The Ambassador was planning to smile as he came out," the staff man said. "He did, didn't he?"

Like a Kabuki Drama

Today was the 166th weekly session of the four-sided Vietnam peace talks since 1969—an exercise as stylized as a Kabuki play, though far longer. Ambassadorial smiles may be planned in advance, but they are executed with little effect. Someone else—Henry A. Kissinger or Le Duc Tho—has the real script.

The talks were originally contrived, if not actually to negotiate peace, at least to provide a rough context, a public face, for negotiations that would take place more privately but at least through the same structure.

The move toward peace died down and the talks remained, caught in their own ritual and symbolized by the great round table whose shape looks different to each side. The Americans and South Vietnamese call it a two-sided table—Communist and anti-Communist. The North Vietnamese call it four-sided—one side for each delegation.

Today, with Washington and Hanoi saying that peace is almost at hand, the delegations took their places according to the old ritual. Mr. Porter and the chief South Vietnamese delegate sat side by side with their aides flanking them: ne big delegation. Across the table Nguyen Minh Vy sat in the middle of his clump of North Vietnamese advisers, and Mrs. Nguyen Thi Binh sat in the middle of Vietcong aides: two delegations.

As participants described the session later, the delegates read their statements—reproaches and a demand for direct talks with the Vietcong from South Vietnam; reproaches and a demand that the United States quit stalling and sign a cease-fire from both North Vietnam and the Vietcong; optimism and a plea for patience from the United States.

They had lunch. One lunch, unvarying from Thursday to Thursday, prepared by the French Government, served in four separate rooms. Quiche Lorraine, cold cuts, fruit cheese, beer and soft drinks.

The delegates returned for the rebuttals, but today only South Vietnam bothered to speak.

Then, in a room downstairs, began what has become the real business of the weekly meeting: the press briefings.

The Vietcong spokesman, Ly Van Sau, a broad-faced, smiling man with signs of considerable inner tension, was first. While the United States was refusing to sign, he said, the Saigon police were arresting and beating people and planning to murder political prisoners.

He was asked whether Saigon's request for direct talks was not a positive move. Translating his reply into French, his interpreter began: "Sometimes Saigon has to show evidence of goodwill." He stopped and corrected himself: "Sometimes Saigon has to show a semblance of goodwill."

A Look of Innocence

Next was the North Vietnam spokesman, Nguyen Than Le, sharper and more relaxed. Where is Le Duc Tho?" the journalists asked referring to persistent rumors of new meetings with Mr. Kissinger. Mr. Le looked innocent.

"According to my sources, and they are good ones, he is in Hanoi."

Had he seen the schedule of Xuan Thuy, head of the delegation?

"Yes, and it is virginal as mine," he replied, picking up a blank notebook and fluttering the pages.

David Lambertson, the American spokesman, is a tall, gaunt man who usually manages to look utterly miserable while saying almost nothing. This time he looked almost cheerful while saying almost nothing.

The South Vietnamese spokesman was last. For most of the past four years his words have attracted so little interest that on one occasion the television technicians packed up his microphone just as he began to speak.

This time more attention was paid as he reiterated a call for talks with the Vietcong and rejected allegations that political prisoners were being mistreated.

Press briefings are normally held in part to reveal and in part to conceal what happens at the negotiating sessions. At the Majestic they are held to magnify what, in fact, does not happen.

When the hopes went out of the meetings in the early days, they remained a valuable forum for the North Vietnamese — and even more the Vietcong — to get their points out to the rest of the world. The United States, which already had ample means for doing this, has been much less happy here.

The Americans were even more unhappy at moments when the North Vietnamese appeared to be conveying a flexible line in private to certain journalists and political contacts while maintaining a hard line at the talks.

According to American sources, the low point came — and it was then that the United States began boycotting the talks for weeks at a time — when Mr. Tho would indicate in his secret talks with Mr. Kissinger concessions that consistently would fail to appear in the more formal and more public sessions.