

Companion article by Thomas W. Lippman, "Thieu Maneuvers," pasted separately.

# 2 Viet Sides Inch to Accord

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## Hanoi's Plan

By Don Oberdorfer

Washington Post Foreign Service

SAIGON, Nov. 11—In early June of this year, the war was blazing hot at Quangtri and Anloc, the United States was bombing the Hanoi area and blockading the port of Haiphong, President Nixon and Soviet leaders were congratulating themselves on the success of the just-completed Moscow summit meeting, Sens. George McGovern and Hubert Humphrey were competing for votes in the crucial California primary—and Communist leaders of South Vietnam were being secretly informed that the party had decided to change its negotiating stand in Paris to bring about withdrawal of all American troops from Vietnam and the release of all U.S. prisoners of war.

The Communist decision to move to a negotiated settlement with the United States on compromise terms represented a fundamental shift by Hanoi, ranking among the most important events of 1972 and of the second Indochina war. In keeping with the gravity of this choice, it was long under consideration and carefully prepared.

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### Breakthrough, From A1

As pieced together from interviews with recent defectors, Communist documents, broadcasts and statements and other sources available here, the decision was preceded by a military offensive with diplomatic aims—itsself a year in the making—and deeply affected by Hanoi's inability to control the maneuverings of the great world powers: the United States, the Soviet Union and China.

At a meeting in a jungle headquarters just across the Cambodian border the leaders were told that one of three acceptable scenarios would be played out in private negotiations with the United States in Paris:

1—An agreement to be drafted and ratified without South Vietnamese government participation which did not involve the political future of the Thieu regime and thus would bring no cease-fire. The war would go on, but without the Americans.

2—An agreement including a cease-fire and political settlement which allowed Pres-

ident Nguyen Van Thieu to remain in power in Saigon.

3—An agreement including a cease-fire and political settlement which provided for Thieu to step down.

### U.S. Phase Ends

Four months later, on Oct. 8, North Vietnamese negotiator Le Duc Tho formally presented the substance of the breakthrough peace proposal to Presidential assistant Henry A. Kissinger, and today it is almost a foregone conclusion on all sides that an end to the American phase of the struggle for Indochina will be agreed upon and announced, at an early date.

Well before the decision was reached, plans were being made to carry forward the struggle in new ways should a cease-fire and political settlement come about. After the decision was made—quite probably in a special, unannounced midyear meeting to the Politburo of the Vietnamese Communist Party in Hanoi—more elaborate preparations were set in motion as the Paris talks moved ever so slowly toward fruition.

### Begin Preparations

The roots of Hanoi's choice reach back to the 19th Plenum of the Central Committee of the party in December 1970-January 1971. Party leaders believed that the American presidential election year of 1972 would be the most advantageous time to deal with Richard Nixon—just as 1968 was their hour of reckoning with Lyndon Johnson. To put their side in a strong po-

sition, they ordered a major offensive for 1972.

According to a former North Vietnamese army officer whom we shall call Bui Tan—like other recent defectors interviewed, he feared family reprisals if his real name were used—Communist supply units in the Cambodian border area were ordered in March 1971 to begin preparations for a military campaign of the future which could last a year and decide the fate of the war.

The orders became more explicit after a late-1971 meeting of the Politburo in

Hanoi and the 20th Plenum of the Central Committee of the party in December 1971-January 1972. Those meetings gave rise to a party resolution authorizing the offensive and explaining how and why the campaign was to be launched.

In February, officer Tan and thousands of other military men and political cadres in the South were told that the battle to come would support the diplomatic struggle at the Paris talks.

"We were told that this was the one time in 1,000 years that the situation would be favorable for us," Tan recalled. "If this attack were not successful, it would be eight years before we could launch another big offensive," he said.

Similar statements of historic purpose had been made just before the 1968 Tet offensive in South Vietnam, but at that time Tan was still in the North. Now he was impressed with the great opportunity and excited that the war might be coming to a victorious end. The 1972 battle was named the Nguyen Hue campaign, after the famous emperor-general who drove the Chinese from Hanoi in 1789 in a surprise attack achieving Vietnamese independence and unity.

### Aims and Tactics

In some of the briefs before the battle, Communist cadres were given further details of aims and tactics. One goal set forth for political officers was to plant agents in every section of every South Vietnamese government agency as well as in religious and political groups. This goal must be met during 1972, the officers were informed in February, to prepare for a possible cease-fire agreement before the year was out.

According to another former officer we shall call Nguyen Tri, a camp was established in a Vietcong area to receive South Vietnamese army defectors this spring and summer. The former South Vietnamese troops were to be indoctrinated and trained for a month and

then sent back to the government side as undercover agents. Some 30 former government soldiers were actually so trained he said, but most of them pleaded that they wanted to go home rather than take up the new assignments they were given.

With all the talk of a favorable constellation of conditions and events in Vietnam and abroad, the Communist briefing officers said very little about a highly visible event taking place in China—the American President's trip as an honored guest to the capital city of North Vietnam's nearest ally.

Some briefers suggested that Chinese officials had been asked to discuss certain issues with Mr. Nixon on behalf of the Vietcong but that the outcome could not be disclosed. Some suspicious cadres obtained the impression that all was not well, and that a disclosure of the Peking results might demoralize the fighters in the South.

### Offensive Begins

In Paris, secret talks between Kissinger and Hanoi representatives had not been held for several months but in mid-February the Communist side signalled that it would soon be ready for new sessions. A tentative secret meeting of March 20, suggested by the United States, was postponed by Hanoi to April 15 and further postponed by mutual consent to April 24.

On March 30, after the meeting was scheduled but before it could be held, Soviet-built tanks backed by more than 15,000 North Vietnamese troops swarmed into South Vietnam's Quangtri province across the Demilitarized Zone. The Nguyen Hue offensive was on.

While refugees were streaming south and South Vietnam was reeling from the shock, further preparations for an eventual cease-fire and political settlement were moving ahead.

In early April, Hunh Tai Phat, a former Saigon architect who is chairman of the National Liberation Front committee for the capital city and president of the

three-year-old "Provisional Revolutionary Government" of South Vietnam, reportedly dispatched letters to a number of prominent Saigon citizens. Phat declared that the objective of the offensive was to hasten the conclusion of the war, and that the NFL was prepared to join in action and discussions with existing political forces, including those which support the Saigon government.

The Communist command, which forecast U.S. military actions in advance throughout most of the war, correctly anticipated that Mr. Nixon would step up air and naval bombardment of North Vietnam in response to the offensive in the South. But as transmitted to fighters in the battle zone, expectations of the planners appear to have been wide

off the mark on at least two points:

First, they expected a severe political reaction in the United States to Mr. Nixon's countermoves, causing him important difficulties and thus weakening his position.

Second, they do not seem to have expected that he could mine the rivers and harbors of North Vietnam without serious challenges from the Soviet Union and China.

North Vietnam's Communist Party Secretary Le Duan was reportedly in Moscow when Mr. Nixon announced his military responses on May 8. Despite the Soviet ships blockaded in Haiphong harbor, the Russians made no countermove against the United States, and indeed went right ahead with their preparations to receive the American President as their state guest for a Moscow summit conference at the end of May.

Le Duan reportedly flew on to Peking, where the reaction was scarcely more satisfying. While the North Vietnamese party leader was a visitor in his capital, Chinese Premier Chou En-lai issued a surprisingly mild rebuff to the American action, calling it "a serious

stepup in the war." He said nothing at all about any Chinese counter-measures.

This, then, was the setting for Hanoi's great decision at the end of May or the first days of June: while heavy fighting continued in the South, the forward momentum of the Nguyen Hue offensive was stalled—or as some observers believe, deliberately suspended. Losses in men and material were very heavy.

In the north, the United States was bombing and mining, with hardly more than a peep from the Communist allies in Moscow and Peking.

There were also indications of comradely pressure on Hanoi to settle with the United States. By mid-June, Soviet President Nikolai Podgorny had flown to Hanoi fresh from talks with Mr. Nixon in Moscow, and Henry Kissinger had flown to Peking. In the United States, Mr. Nixon's prestige and popularity had been vaulted by his Peking and Moscow summit meetings, and it appeared increasingly likely he would be easily re-elected.

As explained in secret to fighters in the South, the

change in Hanoi's previously rock-hard negotiating position was portrayed as sensible and advantageous. It was concerned that the party would suffer morale problems and a loss of face if Thieu should remain in office despite the longstanding insistence on his removal. But briefing officers added that the Vietcong would still control a large part of the countryside and that since the people already knew Thieu to be a corrupt American lackey, his continuance in office would make it easier for the party to win the people.

The changes in the negotiating posture were not to be revealed outside the party ranks, and would only be unveiled to the United States at the last minute when the time was right. Meanwhile, it was necessary to make massive military efforts—particularly in the Vietnamese countryside—to gain as much territory and support as possible before the coming cease-fire.

As far back as June, it was decided that all-out attacks would be launched a few days before the final implementation of the cease-fire to maximize the Com-

munist position for the post-battle era.

There was no public admission of a policy change but some strange things began to happen. It was announced that the "Provisional Revolutionary Government" had reaffirmed its even-point diplomatic stand for the Paris talks in a June meeting in Vietcong-controlled territory—but unlike previous announcements, this one did not spell out just what the seven points included. Communist diplomats at Paris in mid-July continued to say Thieu would have to go, but there was no further mention of his "immediate resignation."

#### Kissinger-Tho Talks

Kissinger met Le Duc Tho in Paris in mid-August, and immediately flew to Saigon to brief Thieu. Le Duc Tho flew back to Hanoi via Moscow and Peking. There are indications now that international guarantees for a new Indochina settlement were then under discussion.

While the clock ticked slowly toward Oct. 3 and the U.S. elections a month beyond, extensive work was in progress in the Communist camp in South Vietnam.