Facing Squarely What We May Obtain in Vietnam

Peace—Or Elegant Disengagement?

By Chester L. Cooper

IN A WASHINGTON HOTEL room one November evening in 1969, a few ex-government officials, who in an earlier incarnation had negotiated with Hanoi, and a few academic experts on Vietnam met to describe a proposal for getting the Paris talks off dead-center. The audience was small and select—two senior administration figures. The proposal, which had been developed over many weeks in Washington, New York and Cambridge, was offered in the spirit of *pro bono publico;* if, after due consideration, the White House rejected the idea, it was understood that there would be no public recrimination.

In essence, the proposal suggested that the administration regard the forthcoming Christmas and New Year as an opportunity to move toward an extended *de facto* cease-fire. Neither side would lose face or sacrifice publicly-held negotiating principles by agreeing to a tacit, reciprocal stand-down starting at Christmas, since the holiday period was typically an occasion for a cease-fire. The "scenario" called for an extension of the cease-fire on the ostensible initiative of the Pope, U Thant and the Geneva Co-Chairmen (the U.K. and the U.S.S.R.), all of whom, together with Hanoi would have been consulted well in advance of the proposed cease-fire date. With luck, diplomatic skill and mutual forbearance for minor violations, the cease-fire might be prolonged through the Vietnamese New Year (six weeks hence) and possibly even beyond.

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If this seemed likely, President Nixon would announce a dramatic acceleration in American troop withdrawal, the Saigon government would broaden its base, Hanoi would release a significant number of American prisoners, the Saigon government and the NLF would form a joint electoral commission to organize a new election for South Vietnam, the International Control Commission would be starched up, and the United States and North Vietnam would meet privately to work out the broad outlines of a final peace settlement.

A few weeks after the proposal was presented to the White House and State Department officials, word came from the White House that the ideas were "premature."

THERE IS MUCH DISCUSSION, some not altogether without the flavor of sour grapes, that if the administration had negotiated seriously early in 1969, the war in Vietnam would have long since been behind us, possibly on even better terms than we are now ready to accept. In the irresponsibility and clarity of hindsight, it is tempting to say that the plan put forward by that small group in November 1969 could have been a promising entry point into the process of working out an early settlement. But to make such a claim would be to ignore some fundamental factors that we can now see were destined to run their course before a meaningful dialogue could take place. Thus, in retrospect, those well-intentioned outsiders were probably naive and their suggestions may well have been "premature."

By late 1969 the administration was still clearly loath to switch its Vietnam policy from a military to a political track. The invasions of Cambodia and Laos, the resumption of the bombing of North Vietnam and the mining of North Vietnamese harbors were still to come. But even if President Nixon had been ready to accept the proposal presented that November night, the Communists would probably have rejected it; the projected joint electoral commission fell far short of their demands for a coalition government and the underlying assumption that all North Vietnamese troops would be removed from South Vietnam when the Americans had withdrawn would probably have been unacceptable to Hanoi. The war could have been stopped in 1969, of course, if Mr. Nixon had agreed to Hanoi's terms, or if the North Vietnamese had agreed to ours. But neither side was of such a mind. Indeed, even a settlement along the lines now being envisaged would probably not have been possible three years ago. Much has happended since to make the belligerents ready for a bargain that would not have been seriously considered then. But we, all of us, are now sorely bloodied and war-weary; a complete American military disengagement now looks good enough in Washington to pay a price heretofore rejected by Presidents Johnson and Nixon, and attractive enough in Hanoi to make a deal heretofore scorned by North Vietnamese leaders. For its part, Washington seems ready to swallow hard and contemplate the prospect of a coalition government and the continuing large scale presence of North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam. And for *its* part, Hanoi has backed down on its long-standing insistence that "satisfactory" political arrangements (including the immediate formation of a coalition government) must precede a cease-fire and has fudged its persistent demand that President Thieu play no role in South Vietnam's political future.

But the inconclusive, costly military struggle, was probably not the only factor which finally brought Hanoi and Washington together. The years have not dealt kindly with relations between the National Liberation Front and North Vietnam. That Hanoi did not insist on Thieu's removal must be galling to the Front. Washington's apparent confidence that North Vietnamese forces will be withdrawn ultimately from South Vietnam may rest on a belief that the Front, in its anxiety to run its own show, will soon insist that Hanoi's troops go home.

THE EMERGING ATTITUDES of Peking and Moscow have also had their effect. We have been at war with Hanoi for over a decade, but know too little about the internal politics of the power structure in North Vietnam to be able to measure the relative influence of hard line, soft line, pro-Chinese, pro-Soviet or purely nationalist elements. Indeed there is probably no American (despite recent professions of expertise from a few journalists) who can speak with credible confidence on the balance of forces in the inner and upper reaches of Hanoi's bureaucracy. In our desperate attempt to influence or pressure the North Vietnamese to settle the war over the years, we have importuned every likely visitor to Peking and have sent platoons of emissaries to Moscow. Chinese and Soviet officials have consistently, and apparently with justification, protested that we exaggerated their influence in Hanoi. To the extent that the influence was there, it was neutralized: Moscow's admonitions to negotiate would have been matched by Peking's promises of support to continue the fighting, and vice-versa. In any case, since both China and Russia wished to see the United States further enmeshed rather than extricated, and since North Vietnam seemed determined to settle for nothing short of victory, why should Peking and Moscow have expended political capital in Hanoi just to please Presidents Johnson and Nixon?

This seems to have changed recently. The tip-off came in the relatively mild Chinese and Soviet reactions to the American blockade of Haiphong harbor and resumption of large-scale bombing. Whatever else may have been accomplished by the administration's diplomatic initiatives toward China and Russia, it is apparent that each nation, perhaps each for its own reason, has passed the word to Hanoi that it would favor a settlement. And that is no small thing.

And what about our ally (remember?)—the Saigon government? If, as a knowledgeable recent visitor to Hanoi reports, there is war-weariness and widespread malaise in North Vietnam, and if, as we know, there is massive disillusionment and lethargy in the United States, one can only imagine the mood of the South Vietnamese. They have been invaded by both Americans and North Vietnamese; they have been exhorted, extorted, bombed, shot, booby-trapped, mortared and assaulted by soldiers of Hanoi, the Vietcong, Saigon, the United States and South Korea; and they have been torn by inner religious, social and economic dissension. The people of South Vietnam must be choking with desire for peace and quiet and just-damn-well-leave-us-alone, please, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Tho and Mr. Bunker and General Ky and Dr. Kissinger and General Westmoreland and Mr. Nixon and General Giap and President Thieu and Sergeant Jones.

The South Vietnamese must yearn for peace with all their hearts—with or without that coin of diplomatic and political exchange, "honor." Will they get it, at long last? The cease-fire that is being contemplated will be fragile and brittle. Regiments of peace-keeping forces will be needed to monitor it effectively. This will mean, alas, yet a new invasion of foreign troops. There will be blood debts and rootless young men to settle them, with millions of guns lying around for the asking. And what of the North Vietnamese forces? The tough Vietcong cadres? The embittered, restless South Vietnamese troops?

There is little to deprecate in the arrangements that have been worked out and much to be thankful for. Nothing more could possibly be accomplished by our continued participation in the war, except for more killing, more destruction, more poison injected into our national blood stream. But let us face up squarely to what we may obtain: Peace? Hell, no. Honor? That will be for historians to judge. A cease-fire? Probably. Of sorts. American disengagement, return of American POWs? Yes. And that's the object of the exercise.