

The Pointmakers

By Frances L. Starnier

BANGKOK, Thailand—It is hardly surprising that the anomalies, the bitter ironies and the Catch-22 lunacy that have marked America's Indochina involvement from the beginning should characterize also its final phase. A conflict that has cost the United States more than \$150 billion, 47,000 dead or missing, 300,000 wounded and at least a decade of moral agony without achieving a single decisive victory—or even becoming legally a "war"—could hardly be expected to be resolved in a clear-cut, rational fashion. And the evidence of the Nine Points Agreement indicates that it will not be.

For President Nguyen Van Thieu, one of the bitterest ironies of the current "peace" negotiations is surely the fact that—despite the months of haggling over the shape of the negotiating table and who would sit at it that preceded the Paris talks—the cease-fire agreement is, nonetheless, apparently strictly a Washington-Hanoi affair.

The irony for President Nixon and his chief negotiator must be said to run in the opposite direction. Little more than a year ago, there was significant opposition to Thieu in almost every segment of Vietnamese society, including his own Cabinet. However, as a result—direct and indirect—of Thieu's political machinations, there was, on election day, no such opposition on the ballot.

It must be said on Thieu's behalf that there is nothing in the Nine Points—at least as revealed so far—that one would expect him to endorse. Almost two decades after John Foster Dulles dissociated the Eisenhower Administration from the conclusions of the first Geneva conference, Eisenhower's Vice President is, apparently, at last set to put the Presidential seal of approval on the 1954 accords. Under Point One the United States is to recognize the "independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Vietnam" as indicated in the '54 agreements; and under Point Five, it accepts the principle of "reunification step by step"—perhaps including even those long-delayed elections.

But, unfortunately for Thieu, even if Richard Nixon's fortunes in Washington, Peking and Moscow have improved in the past twenty years, those of the right wing in Vietnam have not. Thieu could hardly be expected to find a return to the Geneva accords—without, it should be noted, a return to their territorial demarcations—any more acceptable than the 1954 Saigon regime did.

Much has been made in discussions thus far of the Saigon Government's

opposition to the tripartite arrangement called for under Point Four. It is, however, undoubtedly the cease-fire provision, Point Two, that Saigon must find most objectionable. Under it, all American military activities in both North and South must cease within 24 hours of the signing of the agreement; and within sixty days American and other foreign military personnel allied with Saigon are obligated to withdraw completely. But North Vietnamese forces are not so obligated; in fact, their presence in the South is not even acknowledged.

Nor is the position of the Thieu forces apt to be strengthened by the terms of Point Four, relating to Laos and Cambodia. Although Hanoi and Washington undertake—for themselves and the two South Vietnamese parties—to return to the 1954 and 1962 Geneva accords governing those countries, and to respect their neutrality, there is no timetable set, as in Vietnam, for the withdrawal of the opposing foreign troops there.

One can hardly fault Hanoi for insisting on what it did not get in 1954: a settlement based on the realities of the internal political and military situation. Recent maps showing territory held in the South by the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front—territory which is to come under the Provisional Revolutionary Government after the cease-fire—look remarkably like those (non-Western) maps showing the actual situation at the time of the 1954 accords.

Perhaps the ultimate irony of the Nine Point Agreement, however, lies buried in the eighth of the nine points. For more than four years, Richard Nixon has insisted that he would never desert America's allies in Southeast Asia, that he would only acquiesce in a peace with honor, and that he refused to be the first American President to preside over his country's defeat. Hanoi, on the other hand, has insisted that, as the imperialist aggressor, the United States must not only agree to remove itself completely from Vietnam but also pay reparations for the devastation it has caused.

Point Eight should leave little doubt as to which side has prevailed. Under it, the United States agrees to build a "new, equal and mutually beneficial" partnership not with the South and President Thieu but with the North. This concession of equality on Hanoi's part could perhaps be interpreted as a magnanimous face-saving gesture to President Nixon; certainly, up to now, she has always insisted on her own moral, political and—in Vietnam, at least—military superiority.

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