



Reports of Rift Interest Soviets

Post 11/24/72

THE KREMLIN is trying to find out what truth there is in the Washington stories of a falling out between President Nixon and Dr. Kissinger over the Vietnam peace settlement. Soviet agents in Washington have been making discreet enquiries about the report, which first appeared in an ultra-conservative Washington weekly, Human Events, and was then briefly reproduced in the Washington Post.

Human Events said that Kissinger had tried "to foist" the Paris agreement on Mr. Nixon. There followed "a bitter dispute" among top officials and second thoughts "even in the White House," about the agreement Kissinger had negotiated, the paper said. The Washington Post, however, reported that White House officials had scoffed at such rumors.

Faced with a White House mystery, Soviet analysts would attempt the kind of exercise that the CIA makes to find out what goes on in the Kremlin. Only Soviet officials call it Washingtonology, not Kremlinology.

KISSINGER HAD SAID that only "minor" issues remained to be resolved. But Mr. Nixon spoke later of "central" issues. Kissinger had said that only one more negotiating session would suffice. But the White House spokesman later spoke of several. Was there a genuine disagreement in the White House, the Kremlin would ask, or had Mr. Nixon simply changed his mind?

Washingtonology, when practiced from a Soviet vantage point, has one advantage. It is not limited to Washington information, but can be supplemented with insights from the other side of the fence. Why, for instance, did Hanoi press for an immediate cease-fire some time before the election? "You'll have to ask Hanoi," said Kissinger.

The answer is not simply that Hanoi thought it could get better terms before the election than after. Once Hanoi had decided, by late summer, to accept Mr. Nixon's major demands, it concentrated its efforts on the next most important negotiating objective: to prevent the rearming of the South Vietnamese forces to the point where they could become a threat to the regime in the North.

Mr. Nixon called it "Vietnamization," but a Saigon army made strong enough to defeat the Communists in the South might also, Hanoi would have reason to fear, be capable of marching on the North. Mr. Nixon kept telling Hanoi that it must choose between "Vietnamization," thus subtly redefined, and a "negotiated settlement," also redefined to include major Communist concessions.

MOSCOW AND PEKING got the message, and kept urging it on a reluctant Hanoi. After the election, they would have argued, even this choice might disappear, because Mr. Nixon would no longer be under pressure to seek a settlement. Hanoi accepted the bargain. The Paris agreement stipulated that the flow of American arms was to end on November 1 — and, with it, the threat of Vietnamization.

So the reason why Hanoi had been pressing for an immediate cease-fire, even before the election, was to avert a massive last-minute surge in the flow of arms which would nullify its concessions. When Mr. Nixon rejected the Paris draft, and used the time thus gained to do the very thing which Hanoi had paid so dearly to avert, the Communists claimed that they had been cheated out of the bargain they made in good faith.

The reason why Moscow wants to know whether Kissinger intended this all along, or was overruled by

Mr. Nixon, or whether, perhaps, it was a last-minute twist forced on the White House by a genuine change in circumstances, far transcends in importance the immediate issue of peace in Vietnam, important as that is.

What Moscow is asking is whether it can trust Mr. Nixon in the "era of negotiations," and whether it can really march arm-in-arm with him toward the "generation of peace." The White House cannot afford to leave the Kremlin with the wrong impression.