

Was Peace At Hand?

By Tom Wicker

No matter what happens after the Indochinese peace talks resume on Dec. 4, it now seems reasonably clear that Dr. Henry Kissinger had little basis for his statement on Oct. 26, twelve days before the election, that "peace is at hand," subject only to a few minor details of negotiation. He had, it is clear, no real agreement with Hanoi and Saigon on ending the war; no such agreement seems to exist a month later; and it is highly questionable whether either Dr. Kissinger or President Nixon could have believed on Oct. 26 that they actually had reached an agreement that would bring what Mr. Nixon called that night in Ashland, Ky., "peace with honor and not peace with surrender."

Quite obviously, there can be no cease-fire in South Vietnam until the Saigon Government agrees to a cease-fire, for the simple reason that that Government has in its army a million men, armed to the teeth by the United States. In the final analysis, the only way Washington can impose a cease-fire on that Government and that army is by threatening to cut off their military supplies.

Is that a serious proposition? After having for four years maintained the war, at a cost of 20,000 American deaths, billions of American dollars, and incalculable Indochinese casualties, all for the stated purpose of giving the Saigon regime a "chance" to survive, is it really conceivable that Mr. Nixon is now prepared to ask Congress to shut off military support to that regime—thus throwing an "ally" to the Communists, even though Mr. Nixon has said repeatedly that if he did that, a gigantic bloodbath would ensue and world peace would be threatened?

Yet, as recently as this weekend,

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President Thieu's controlled newspaper, Tin Song, said in Saigon that before there can be a cease-fire, North Vietnam must withdraw its troops from South Vietnam, the demilitarized zone—in effect, a national border—must be re-established at the 17th parallel, and the role of the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord—envisioned in the Kissinger-Le Duc Tho draft accord—must be more clearly defined. These are merely the central issues of the war; if they have

to be settled before Saigon agrees to a cease-fire, then it follows that on Oct. 26 the Nixon Administration did not really have an agreement for a cease-fire that depended only on the working out of a few details.

As another example, Dr. Kissinger said that the release of American prisoners of war by Hanoi was not dependent on the release of political prisoners by Saigon. This seemed to be confirmed in a statement by Xuan Thuy, a principal North Vietnamese negotiator. Yet, since then, the North Vietnamese Communist newspaper, Nhan Dan, has asserted just the opposite view, and the North Vietnamese summary of the draft accord (with which Dr. Kissinger said he had "no complaint") declared that "the return of all captured and detained personnel of the parties shall be carried out simultaneously with the U.S. troops' withdrawal."

Since many political prisoners held by Saigon would be an important part of the so-called "third force" supposed to be included in the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord, is it realistic to suppose that Hanoi agreed to leave them to the mercy of Saigon? In any case, it is a legitimate question whether Dr. Kissinger was entitled to speak as specifically on the matter as he did on Oct. 26.

By far the major question concerns the status of North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam. The summary of the draft accord with which Dr. Kissinger had "no complaint" on Oct. 26 does not mention a withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces; every commentator pointed out that this was a major American concession. Yet, Saigon patently is unwilling to accept this arrangement; and some informed Government sources insist that Dr. Kissinger's failure to secure an agreement for North Vietnamese withdrawal caused Washington—not just Saigon—to pull back from accepting his draft accord with Le Duc Tho. To have accepted that draft, they say, would have given Hanoi what it had sought all along—an American withdrawal from the battlefield, while Hanoi was left free to settle Indochinese military and political affairs in direct and unimpeded struggle with Saigon.

Now it is being asserted in Washington, through studied leaks and calculated statements, that the American side is pressing for further concessions

only in order to be able to tell Saigon honestly that further concessions cannot be had; even if that were true, however, it still implies that on Oct. 26 there was no real basis for asserting that only a few unimportant details stood in the way of a peace which was "at hand."

On that date, Dr. Kissinger—who was just back from Saigon—must have known that President Thieu did not accept the most important parts of the draft accord; he could hardly have been justified in asserting, therefore, that only a few minor details remained to be worked out with Hanoi; and if it finally turns out that the central issue of the renewed negotiations is the withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces, the real question will be whether President Nixon himself ever accepted the Kissinger-Le Duc Tho draft accord, which was supposed to have meant that peace was at hand.