

# The Vietnam Handshake

One month has elapsed since that dramatic White House briefing by Dr. Henry Kissinger. "We remain convinced that the issues that I have mentioned are soluble in a very brief period of time," President Nixon's negotiator said. "We have undertaken, and I repeat it here publicly, to settle them at one more meeting and to remain at that meeting for as long as is necessary to complete the agreement." This undertaking to the people of the United States and of Vietnam has now been broken. Perhaps the reasons are technical, but there are ominous signs that more profound considerations may be promoting ruinous second thoughts.

White House spokesmen now stress the quest for "a settlement that will last, not just for the short term but for the long term." This smacks dangerously of the inflated war aims that kept the Johnson and Nixon Administrations fighting so intensely in Vietnam long after knowledgeable strategists had concluded these aims were unattainable.

Far from envisaging a disengagement of American personnel from Vietnam, the Administration is revealed to have embarked on a secret build-up of "civilian" personnel under Defense Department contract to "advise" the South Vietnamese military establishment. And four weeks after the White House declared that "peace is at hand," the United States carried out two days of what was officially described as the heaviest B-52 bombardment of North Vietnam of the whole war.

Pressing the advantage which he has apparently gained in the past month of jockeying, President Thieu has sent a special envoy to meet Mr. Nixon this week, after which he is to accompany Dr. Kissinger to the renewed dialogue with Hanoi's Le Duc Tho next week. Among the "clarifications" the United States is reportedly seeking from North Vietnam is a specific pledge to withdraw some of its troops from the South after the cease-fire, thus soothing one of President Thieu's deepest fears. From the start, Dr. Kissinger's critics and supporters alike spotted the absence of any visible concession by Hanoi on this point as a critical element in the give-and-take that had gone into the basic accord; if it is being injected as a new element at this stage, what is left of the whole tissue of understanding?

It seems impossible to doubt, from the statements of both sides, that Dr. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho reached a handshake agreement a month ago to end ten years of war in Vietnam; the White House disclosed this tentative accord just before the American Presidential election. As every collective bargainer knows, the whole concept of negotiation is built on mutual respect for the integrity of such agreements, whatever minor difficulties may attend their translation into formal contract language. If a veto by President Thieu is leading to United States insistence on renegotiation of one or more of the most fundamental clauses in the agreement, the promised light at the end of the tunnel may once again be receding into dim shadow.