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Is Nixon stumbling block to peace?

WASHINGTON — There are two stories about how George McGovern handled the peace issue in the last campaign and together they may throw light upon a question which has not yet been answered: Namely, how did President Nixon handle the peace issue in the last campaign?

The first story comes from the White House. It is told to those who ask why the President was so angry at McGovern as the campaign drew to a close.

The story goes like this: After Henry Kissinger returned from Paris in late October with the news that "peace is at hand," his deputy, Gen. Alexander Haig, was sent to brief McGovern's representative, Paul Warnke, former undersecretary of defense and now a Washington lawyer.

According to the White House story, Warnke greeted Haig's outline of the peace agreement with enthusiastic approval and promised Haig he would try to persuade McGovern to the same view. Whereupon, said the White House, McGovern proceeded to endanger peace by denouncing the plan as a fraud, suggesting that Mr. Nixon had misled the American people into thinking that there was a deal when there was none. No wonder, say White House aides, that the boss was angry.

McGovern version

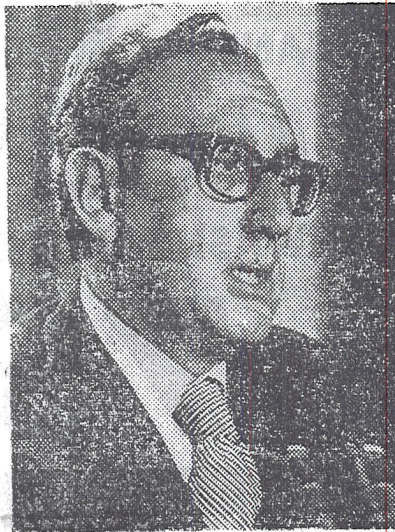
That's the White House version. Now listen to the other side. According to Warnke, Haig brought him the terms — the same as those he had heard Kissinger outline publicly on Oct. 26. It had been Warnke's longtime view — and that of his law partner and former chief, Clark Clifford, one-time secretary of defense, as well — that the war was a

terrible mistake and that the best course now was to get out on such terms as would permit safe withdrawal and the return of the prisoners. Since the Kissinger arrangements met those objectives, Warnke said they seemed all right to him and he would so inform McGovern.

From his campaign plane, McGovern discussed the deal with both Warnke and Clifford. He then welcomed it publicly

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and asked why it couldn't have been agreed upon two years ago. Later, after Gen. Thieu had denounced the plan, and after the White House had said that more negotiating sessions would be required, McGovern began to question whether the Nixon Administration had an agreement.



Henry Kissinger
Something went wrong?

As the campaign ended, he was insisting that it did not.

Those are the two stories. They do not conflict in detail; they differ only in each side's suspicions of the motives of the other. Taken together, however, they suggest that something went wrong with Kissinger's peace plan after he had brought it home from Paris — even perhaps before he outlined it to a grateful world.

Other major issues

What were those few details that Kissinger said needed to be straightened out? At one point, he suggested that they were no greater than difficulties in translation. Were they, in fact, major issues? Were they such details as whether North Vietnam would keep its troops in South Vietnam? Kissinger has never been a hard-liner on Vietnam in the way President Nixon is a hard-liner. He has seen the war as something to get out of. His chief has seen it as something to win. So the two stories suggest that Henry Kissinger brought home a peace plan that Richard Nixon wouldn't buy. Why, otherwise, would Mr. Nixon have been angry? Does one who is certain of his ability to announce peace grow angry at another's doubt? Disdainful, but not angry.

Anger is the function of pride, the last refuge of the embarrassed. A man who knows how it's all going to come out cannot be angry. And so it seems to me that the intricate negotiations we are now hearing about are even more intricate than we have been told; that Henry Kissinger's toughest opponent in his effort to swing a deal is not Le Duc Tho but Richard Nixon.