

Hanoi still holds cards in negotiations for peace

WASHINGTON—If you had talked about Vietnam a month or so before the election with members of Mr. Nixon's team, you would probably have heard something like this:

"They (meaning North Vietnam) had better take what they can get—now. If the boss is re-elected, he won't have to give up anything."

That was the line—and it seemed a very logical line. Mr. Nixon was offering North Vietnam an excellent chance to take over South Vietnam at some time in the future—in return for the fig leaf of "honor," a return of the prisoners and a non-Communist Saigon government at the moment of American withdrawal.

A pretty good deal

It was a pretty good deal. As George McGovern pointed out, it was a deal Mr. Nixon might have had some time ago, but even McGovern didn't criticize the deal. It was, indeed, so good a deal that one member of Mr. Nixon's team was accustomed to shake his head in horrified contemplation of what might happen to North Vietnam if their negotiators refused Mr. Nixon's terms before Mr. Nixon was made tougher and stronger by renewed mandate from the people.

There seems little doubt that members of Mr. Nixon's team were reflecting what Mr. Nixon was thinking. Indeed, as the election deadline neared, the President was so sure of re-election that he upped the ante. When Henry Kissinger came back from Paris to say he had brought peace, Mr. Nixon undercut him. Kissinger was forced to change his tune and to say instead that peace was "at hand."

Not quite as simple

But now that the election is over and Kissinger is negotiating for tougher terms, it may be well to remind ourselves that it isn't quite as simple as our leader thought. What can Mr. Nixon do—now that he has a fresh mandate—that he couldn't do before?

Q—Can he bomb any harder?

A—Only if he is interested in establishing some unsurpassable record. We have already rained more bombs on Vietnam than the British and American air forces dropped

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over Western Europe in World War II and there is not the slightest indication that the bombing has weakened North Vietnam's will.

Q—Can he send American troops back into Indochina to invade the north?

A—Not unless he wishes to be the first American President since Abraham Lincoln to face rebellion.

Q—Can he beef up the South Vietnamese army to invade North Vietnam?

A—Maybe, but only maybe. After 12 years of American beefing up the South Vietnamese army is still something American generals talk about in terms of "maybe."

Q—Isn't there anything else he can do?

A—No.

In short, it is unwise to think of Mr. Kissinger, representing the strongest power on earth, as holding all the cards while he negotiates with a tiny state whose principal industry is making mud huts and rice paddies. North Vietnam has stronger cards than we do. They have at least 145,000 men on the ground; they have—despite the blockade—an apparently sure source of supply. They have large numbers of active sympathizers in the south; they have our prisoners.

There is no reason to suppose, therefore, that they will settle easily; no reason to suppose that Mr. Kissinger will come back from his present journey with very much more than he brought before.

In short, Mr. Nixon's fresh mandate, which seemed so important to his team only a few weeks ago, really hasn't changed anything. Both sides are about where they were a couple of years ago, only wiser and sadder and more exhausted.