

Kissinger Then and Now

By Anthony Lewis

LONDON, Dec. 10—At what we hope is the brink of success for Henry Kissinger in his long search for peace in Vietnam, it is fascinating to look back at the paper in which he roughed out his approach to the negotiations. That was his article of January, 1969, in *Foreign Affairs*.

Unlike many American officials before and since, Kissinger did not deceive himself about a military victory around the corner. He saw that the United States commitment had to be limited. He was realistic about the strengths and weaknesses of the two sides, perceiving with particular foresight that the international situation was "precarious" for Hanoi.

He was skeptical of the two most widely discussed possible negotiating objectives, a coalition government or a ceasefire. The latter, he warned, would make South Vietnam "a crazy quilt, with enclaves of conflicting loyalties all over the country." A ceasefire would also raise severe problems of verification, enforcement and control of guerrilla activity.

Kissinger concluded that the United States should seek not a negotiated political solution but a limited military one—a "staged withdrawal" by American and North Vietnamese forces, leaving the conflicting parties in South Vietnam to work out the political future. That would meet the crucial objective of "ending the war honorably."

Four years later, it appears that the terms of any agreement finally made with Le Duc Tho would meet Kissinger's 1969 ideas only in part.

There has been no mutual withdrawal of forces, and there is little likelihood of a formal promise by Hanoi to pull her troops out. The United States has accepted the idea of a ceasefire, necessarily. At this point it is even doubtful that there will be any agreed map of territorial control in South Vietnam, a lack that will make the job of policing a truce more formidable.

On the other hand, Kissinger did succeed in separating the two tracks, military and political. The peace terms tentatively agreed in October would allow the United States to pull all its forces out of South Vietnam with the political future there still open—and with our man, Nguyen Van Thieu, still in power in Saigon.

What Kissinger did not foresee, or did not project in *Foreign Affairs*, was the cost of meeting some of his aims.

He did not tell us that we would have to drop another four million tons of bombs on Indochina to achieve our

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negotiating objectives in part. Or spend another 20,000 American lives. Or send another 50,000 soldiers home with serious wounds.

Nor did Kissinger have, or convey, any idea of what it would cost the people of the two Vietnams, Laos and Cambodia to have his minimum negotiating aims reached. He did not tell us that South Vietnam alone would suffer upwards of 80,000 soldiers killed and 240,000 wounded, 165,000 civilians dead and 400,000 wounded, an estimated 1,850,000 made homeless.

It is fair to say that Kissinger probably did not envisage costs of that kind when he published his negotiating formula. For he wrote that he did not believe a "prolonged" negotiation was possible. What, then, went wrong, so far as we can identify it, on the American side of the talks?

By all appearances, the Nixon Administration for a long time was still chasing the illusion of victory, whatever Kissinger may have said in *Foreign Affairs*. It was not prepared to settle for the status quo in South Vietnam, with power divided between Saigon and the National Liberation Front. Only after a time did realism set in.

Cyrus Vance, Paris negotiator in 1968-9, was the first to take up the ceasefire idea. He wrote in 1969 that it was important because it recognized the status quo—and that was necessary for serious peace talks. It was not until October, 1970, that President Nixon made a ceasefire proposal.

More broadly, the Nixon Administration attempted for years to do two inconsistent things. It tried to settle with Hanoi by persuading her that the political future in the South would be open. At the same time it was helping to build Thieu into a figure with enormous military and autocratic political power.

After these four years South Vietnam has one million men under arms—the equivalent of twelve million in the United States in terms of population. President Thieu's police force numbers 119,000, 15,000 or 20,000 of those in the special branch. Thousands of civilians are held in prison without trial, among them some of the independent non-Communists with whom Americans would naturally identify.

It is too late to avoid the costs now, or to start negotiating on a different formula. We can only hope that Kissinger and his principal remember what has happened during the last four years as they weigh peace in the balance now.
