

# Vietnam, Paris, Washington

By James Reston

PARIS, Dec. 14—The Vietnam peace talks in Paris are still going on, but the point of decision is really back in the White House, where it has been from the start. The question now is whether President Nixon is prepared to make a separate peace with Hanoi and the South Vietnamese Communists, and so far he has held back.

Henry Kissinger failed to get agreement here on a cease-fire, primarily because he was never authorized to play the President's trump card. He tried to persuade the South Vietnamese that they had more to gain by accepting a cease-fire on Washington's terms than by opposing it, but General Thieu's representatives here in Paris would not agree.

Mr. Kissinger was apparently authorized to imply that the U.S. would sign a separate cease-fire agreement, however reluctantly, if General Thieu didn't go along. He held to the letter and the spirit of his instructions, but he was never able to say that the United States Government had decided to sign alone by a certain date, so Saigon stalled and blocked the agreement the President was willing to sign.

This raises a fundamental question for Mr. Nixon. He has backed Thieu for years. He has defended him against all the antiwar critics in the United States. He has even risked war with the Soviet Union and China by mining the harbor of Haiphong and carrying the air war to Hanoi and even to the China border in order to demonstrate his support of General Thieu and the Saigon regime.

But General Thieu's response to all this has been to oppose President Nixon's compromise cease-fire agreement with the Vietnamese Communists

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and even to villify Mr. Kissinger in the Saigon press for carrying out what Saigon knew to be President Nixon's diplomatic instructions.

It has been obvious for months and even years that, while Washington and Saigon were allies, their national interests would not be the same once Hanoi was ready to sign a compromise cease-fire agreement.

President Nixon never promised to guarantee the security of the Saigon regime, but merely to give it a "fair chance" to defend itself. He has taken great political and military risks to give General Thieu this chance, but now Thieu is insisting that President Nixon do more—keep fighting and negotiating until the Communists agree that Hanoi withdraw all its troops and recognize Saigon's authority over all the territory of South Vietnam, including the areas the Communists still control.

Washington has tried to persuade Saigon that this may be an understandable but is nevertheless an unreasonable demand. Yet General Thieu insists that Mr. Kissinger negotiate Saigon's control of areas which neither the South Vietnamese nor even the American Air Force have been able to command.

President Nixon has gone to great lengths—some of his critics would say almost to ridiculous lengths—to support General Thieu, but the South Vietnamese leader has shown little interest in the President's problems and is now trying to blackmail him into carrying on the war on Saigon's terms.

The last two negotiating sessions here in Paris have made this perfectly clear. The President has been patient ever since he authorized Mr. Kissinger late in October to announce that "peace is at hand." But patience by Messrs. Nixon and Kissinger has not been enough. General Thieu has interpreted Washington's patience as weakness, and now the Paris game is up.

Nobody here in Paris pretends any longer that the technicians who have been left behind will be able to arrange a compromise which Henry Kissinger failed to negotiate. So now the President either has to go along with General Thieu and the war as it is, and forget his hopes of getting the American prisoners back by Christmas and the war behind him by his Inauguration Day on Jan. 20, or make clear to Mr. Thieu that he is going to sign the separate peace, however reluctantly, by a certain date, and soon.

Even then, General Thieu might not agree to sign on Mr. Nixon's cease-fire terms; but at least the Paris talks would be brought down to reality. Lacking a clear decision in the White House to sign a separate peace by a date certain, the chances are that there will be no agreement in Paris.

However, once there is a clear decision by President Nixon to sign a separate peace agreement, General Thieu might, even then, not go along. But until such a decision is made, the judgment of the men involved in peace talks here is that there will be no settlement. In short, the resolution of the Paris talks does not lie here but in the White House, and with President Nixon. The buck has to stop somewhere, and as Harry Truman said, it always stops on the President's desk.

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