

Reports suggest Nixon faces a

three-pronged

NEW YORK — Dr. Henry A. Kissinger's astonishing news conference was clearly aimed at putting the blame on the North Vietnamese for the impasse now reached in the Paris negotiations. This possibility had been telegraphed when an American spokesman in Paris said the Communist side was like "the high-pressure salesman who tries to obtain immediate signature of an incomplete contract."

The effrontery of this approach passes belief. On Oct. 26 Kissinger himself said that "what remains to be done is the smallest part of what has already been accomplished" and stressed that nothing remained but technical and drafting details. It seems reasonably clear that it was the United States, on behalf of South Vietnam, that reopened substantive questions Kissinger had described as settled on Oct. 26.

He said then: "The principal provisions were and are that a cease-fire would be observed in South Vietnam at a time to be mutually agreed upon. It would be a cease-fire in place." But it has developed that much of the recent round of negotiations has been about Saigon's insistence on either North Vietnamese withdrawal or concurrence in a declaration that the Saigon government is sovereign throughout South Vietnam. Either way, the agreed-upon "cease-fire in place" would be negated.

The major issues

Saigon also is said to be seeking modification of the so-called National Council of Reconciliation agreed to by Kissinger; it wants the non-Communist "third force" left out. But which force controls what territory in South Vietnam, and who is to have power—either all or a share of it—in Saigon are, and always

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have been, the major issues of the war. Even that same American spokesman conceded that the recent round of negotiations concentrated on "issues of central importance." Kissinger said on Oct. 26 that such issues had been settled—"and we give the assurance that we will stick by what we have negotiated and what we have achieved so laboriously."

He said then, too, that agreement had become possible, when it had not been in the preceding four years, because Hanoi had finally accepted the principle that the military issues should be settled first and that then "the two South Vietnamese parties shall settle together the internal matters of South Vietnam."

But everything so far learned about



President Thieu
'Central issues'

the negotiations since Oct. 26, and after President Nixon's landslide re-election just 12 days later, suggest that if Hanoi had accepted that principle, Richard M. Nixon has not yet finally done so. Instead, he seems still to be trying to arrange "the internal matters of South Vietnam" to Saigon's liking and his own political needs.

Hard to convince

Kissinger will find it hard to convince the world that it is Hanoi that is responsible for the failure to conclude an agreement, when he so clearly indicated on Oct. 26 that peace was "at hand" subject only to a few minor details, and when it was the United States that refused to meet the original Oct. 31 target for signing. Everything else that is known suggests, instead, that Nixon is confronted with a three-pronged dilemma:

He can sign a separate agreement with Hanoi but without Saigon; it would be essentially the agreement detailed by Kissinger on Oct. 26.

He can find some means of pressuring President Thieu into signing that agreement.

Or he can abandon the agreement of Oct. 26.

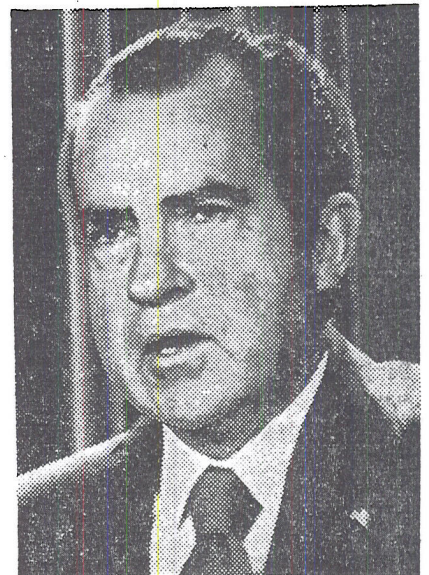
Nixon's difficulty

Either of the first two choices would be more difficult for Nixon to take than may be commonly believed, and the difficulty is largely of his own making. It is that he has fought for four years a war of terrible cost in lives, dollars and national unity solely in order that the Thieu regime might have what he calls "a chance" to survive and thus avoid the bloodbath of 500,000 or more execu-

tions that Nixon has repeatedly predicted.

So it would not now be easy for Nixon to announce that he will sign a separate agreement with Hanoi, or even to threaten to do so, when Saigon is trumpeting to the world that that agreement does not give it a chance to survive—since it would leave the North Vietnamese army in South Vietnam, and admit both the Viet Cong and non-Communist, but anti-Thieu, elements to some degree of political power in Saigon. Incredible as it may seem, therefore, it now appears that the President is opting for the third choice. He is backing away from the agreement that caused Kissinger to proclaim that peace was at hand, and if the American people can be deceived one more time into believing that Hanoi is to blame, he may even get away with it.

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President Nixon
Difficult decisions

Passages marked in red not included in NYTimes version, 17 Dec 72.