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Bombs Away . . .

The best hope for peace in Indochina since 1954 has been severely shaken by a hail of American bombs on Haiphong and the outskirts of Hanoi in a turn from negotiation once again to confrontation. Whatever else the resumed bombing of North Vietnam above the 20th Parallel may accomplish, it is not likely to hasten—and could indefinitely postpone—the “just and fair” agreement that Henry Kissinger has said is the President’s objective.

There will be endless argument over the cause of the breakdown in negotiations that Mr. Kissinger had hailed so optimistically only two months ago, on the eve of the Presidential election. Mr. Nixon’s top foreign policy adviser has attempted to pin the blame solely on the North Vietnamese, who no doubt have indulged in the exasperating nitpicking and backing and hauling that have always characterized Communist negotiators.

Others can point with impressive authority to Saigon, where President Thieu is reaping the rewards of stubborn opposition to terms that he rightly perceived threatened his tenuous hold on a war-weary South Vietnam. Certainly Mr. Thieu is the principal beneficiary of the failure in Paris, which he promptly and openly did all in his power to bring about.

But it was Washington that introduced Mr. Thieu’s substantive demands into the Paris talks, upsetting the tentative agreement that had been hammered out in October and opening the way to counterdemands from the other side. It is President Nixon, according to all available testimony, who is now insisting that a final accord somehow require Hanoi to recognize that Saigon is to remain in control of the South.

However devoutly to be wished, this is an unrealistic condition that attempts to impose at the peace table a political solution that has not been won—and cannot be won—on the field of battle. Even if the Communists finally agreed to the elaborate supervisory machinery proposed by Mr. Kissinger, no international observer force could guarantee survival of the American-backed anti-Communist regime in Saigon after American forces were withdrawn. Everyone from the White House down—and especially the White House—must have realized this from the outset.

What Mr. Kissinger said the other day about Hanoi is just as applicable to Washington. “It is paradoxically easier,” he observed, “to face the risks of war than the uncertainty of peace.” The United States will never extricate itself from the immense material, moral and human costs of the Indochina conflict until a President—or Congress—has the courage to face the uncertainties of a peace which must inevitably leave the political fate of Vietnam to be decided by the Vietnamese themselves.

...Deception or Naivete?

By their own words, President Nixon and Mr. Kissinger were either deceptive or naïve in their pre-election assurances to the American people about the imminence of peace in Vietnam. This is the sorry conclusion from the White House negotiator’s remarkable briefing last Saturday.

Dissembling leaps out of seeming candor. Mr. Kissinger speaks of a “massive Communist effort to launch an attack throughout South Vietnam,” but says nothing about the accelerated shipments of American war matériel also under way those last days of October in anticipation of a cease-fire.

The official record now shows just how flimsy was the basis for the optimistic White House statements of Oct. 26. The machinery for international supervision of the cease-fire, for example. Apparently North Vietnam’s detailed proposals for establishing such a mechanism were not even on the table until last week. However reprehensible was Hanoi’s delay in presenting these “protocols,” it is difficult to understand how anyone familiar with the workings of the stillborn International Control Commission after 1954 could have possibly concluded, as Mr. Kissinger put it, that this was “a largely technical matter.”

Mr. Kissinger says the Administration wanted the agreement to “make clear that the two parts of Vietnam would live in peace with each other and that neither side would impose its solution on the other by force.” Now what do President Nixon and his advisers believe that the history of Vietnam for the last eighteen years has been all about? Far from being a “modest” requirement “relatively easily achievable,” as Mr. Kissinger would have us believe, this condition is nothing less than the point of the whole war, through the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon Administrations.

Mr. Kissinger is no doubt accurate in describing how the North Vietnamese constantly maneuvered the past month to gain substantive points under guise of technical formulations; but what would one expect of negotiations between adversaries? Talk of showing “good will” does not fall gracefully from the mouthpieces of an Administration which showered Vietnam with the heaviest bombardments of the war right after declaring that peace is at hand. Probably Hanoi did try to walk away from a handshake agreement; but Mr. Kissinger’s account gives ample evidence that Washington, presumably under pressure from President Thieu, did likewise. In diplomacy, as in all human relations, it is basic wisdom to suspect anyone who lays all blame on his adversary.

Denying any deception, Administration spokesmen argue that it was Hanoi, and not Washington, that publicized the nine-point accord before the American election. This is true, but insignificant. If the Nixon Administration had wished to convey the reservations it now holds, it could easily have responded to Hanoi’s statement noncommittally or without fanfare. There was no need to answer a radio broadcast with a public White House presentation heralding the imminent end of a decade of warfare and stating, in Mr. Kissinger’s words just twelve days before the Presidential election: “We have undertaken, and I repeat it here publicly, to settle [the issues remaining] at one more meeting.”

Peace was not at hand, and Mr. Kissinger has given no convincing reasons for believing that it was. Between the alternatives of deception and naïveté, the second Nixon Administration opens on the foundation of a formidable ambiguity.