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The Great Peace Charade

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"Charade: a parlor game in which the players are typically divided into teams, members of which take turns in acting out in pantomime a word or phrase, often syllable by syllable, which members of their own team must guess."—the Random House Dictionary of the English Language.

As Dr. Henry Kissinger tells it, the North Vietnamese have engaged in procedures in Paris that "can only mock the hopes of humanity" and so the President has decided that "we could not engage in a charade with the American people". So the talks have been suspended and the bombing of the North above the 20th parallel has been resumed, presumably to knock some sense into the heads of the men in Hanoi. Well, we do not doubt from Dr. Kissinger's account, that the North Vietnamese are up to some dark and dubious bargaining tricks; on the contrary we would be surprised if they weren't. And we are astonished that the President's chief Vietnam negotiator, who is not exactly new to dealing with Communist negotiators, seems so surprised that the North Vietnamese are not behaving like perfect gentlemen. The tactic of suddenly reintroducing new and hard demands, of renegeing on tentative past agreements in advance of an across-the-board settlement, of seeking to squeeze out last minute concessions and to undermine broadly-stated principles—all this is familiar stuff, reminiscent of almost all of the classic confrontations with the Russians and others across countless bargaining tables over the years.

Nor do we doubt that the proposals that the Communists presented to us in the last few days of the talks last week would in fact make a shambles of a cease fire, and as Dr. Kissinger argues, give North Vietnamese operatives a license to spread across the countryside and enter every village in the South as members of inspection teams ostensibly charged with keeping the peace. The President and his negotiator were probably well advised under the circumstances not to accept terms which would have given formal endorsement to a peace plan which would deny the Thieu government or any other independent regime in Saigon a reasonable chance to work out its own destiny.

But not having ourselves introduced the word "charade" into the conversation, we feel free to call attention to its dictionary definition: it is a game "in which the players are typically divided into teams"—that is to say, it takes two teams to play. And it is our reluctant conclusion, that Mr. Nixon and Dr. Kissinger have made their own considerable contribution to this particular charade. The word they have been trying to get across to their team members, which is to say, the American public, is "peace"—as in "peace is at hand." And it is important to remember that the critical piece of pantomime, if you will, was played out on television on the eve of the national election, with the most careful calculation, with what had to be enormous political effect. Everything we were told by Dr. Kissinger on October 26th pointed in one clear direction: a settlement was within handy reach, a matter of a few days and a little good will; the American role in the war was just about over; the President

had for all practical purposes fulfilled his 1968 campaign pledge, renewed in 1969, to "end the war" in Vietnam.

Now the very least that can be said, on the basis of Dr. Kissinger's latest progress report on the war, last Saturday, is that he and the President have been taken for a long hard ride by the North Vietnamese; in short, they have been had, by Dr. Kissinger's own admission, and so have all of us by indirection, because nobody is any longer talking about peace being at hand. Rather, we are being told that every time we reach out for it, Hanoi's bargainers snatch it from our grasp.

We are still, of course, getting some of the same old pantomime: "great progress has been made . . . we have an agreement that is 99 per cent completed" . . . although Dr. Kissinger concedes that the remaining one per cent is "a fundamental point." We do not know, because nobody's saying what this last difficulty is. But our own interpretation of Dr. Kissinger's analyses suggests that what remains to be decided, while it may turn on such specifics as the machinery of cease-fire enforcement, is in fact nothing less than the political future of South Vietnam. That is to say, what remains to be settled is what the war has been fought over for several decades.

This, in our view, is a large part of what gives the talks the character of a charade. For as they have been presented to us by the Nixon administration, the talks are supposed to produce "peace"; they are supposed to reconcile the diametrically opposed objectives of North and South Vietnam in a way that will satisfy the interests of both sides and justify hundreds of thousands of deaths and endless expenditures. And this, in our view, cannot be done. As we have argued, there is no conceivable settlement short of an unwinnable victory in conventional terms that will not impose on both sides a risk of losing almost everything each has been fighting for while simultaneously granting both sides some reasonable opportunity of achieving through a settlement and a cease fire what they have been unable to achieve by force of arms. It is nonsense to suppose, after an end to the fighting as it has been waged the past ten years, that the struggle will not continue in other subtler forms—to suppose that Hanoi has abandoned its objective because of the bombing and because of the big power diplomacy conducted by Mr. Nixon and Dr. Kissinger with the Russians and the Chinese. The performance of the North Vietnamese negotiators late last week, you would think, offers conclusive proof of this.

And yet, the President gives no evidence of being prepared to accept this harsh reality. He continues—mostly through his spokesman these days—to hold out this bright promise of enduring peace, when the most he can hope to achieve is an American disengagement from the conflict on terms which will bring back our prisoners and leave the South Vietnamese a reasonable chance of survival by their own efforts and out of their own will. This is the risk Mr. Nixon will not face up to. And that, in turn, is why it will take more than an end to Hanoi's pantomime to put a stop to the Great Peace Charade.