

# Break-Up of the Peace Talks: Undocumented Accusations

FOR THE WORLD at large, the floundering Vietnam negotiations and their jolting B-52 bombing aftermath continue to be a grim game of blind man's buff.

Without access to the text of the proposed agreement between the United States and North Vietnam, and the accompanying "understandings" and protocols, no one can make a factual independent judgment of the accusations of blame that Washington and Hanoi are flinging at each other over who reneged on what. Only fragments of information, surrounded by deliberate disinformation, fill the air.

The argument against disclosing the texts is that publication could jeopardize any chance for completing the blocked negotiations. But this will become an increasingly untenable rationale if the battle continues and a war in which the beginnings were cloaked in secrecy becomes a war whose continuance cannot be explained for reasons of national security.

THE PUBLIC as a whole knows even less than it thinks it does about what happened to the expectations for "peace" that soared so high in late October, only to be punctured in December. The press, with a few notable exceptions, bears some culpability also, if only because too often it acted as a mirror, simply reflecting what it was told, without sufficient persistent, questioning of all that was placed in front of the mirror.

On Oct. 26, North Vietnam issued what is still the only detailed account about the substance of the negotiations that exists on the public record, in the

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form of a nine-point summary. Presidential adviser Henry A. Kissinger swiftly endorsed that account as "correctly summarized."

But in fact there is no "nine-point" negotiating draft, despite repeated use of that term as a result of journalistic compression.

American and North Vietnamese officials still refuse to disclose even how many points there are in the elusive and ill-named "peace" package. A Nixon administration official elliptically told newsmen in Washington on Wednesday: "The nine points were really a schematic description of an agreement that has a totally different number of articles than nine."

THE OCTOBER version of the accord was hailed by the White House as 90 per cent complete; last Saturday, when Kissinger acknowledged that the negotiations had reached an impasse, he said they were "99 per cent completed as far as the text of the agreement is concerned."

"But that alone is not the problem," Kissinger acknowledged, because while "we are one decision away from a settlement," which he said Hanoi "already had agreed to" two weeks earlier and then pulled back, Kissinger acknowledged that the omission is fundamental. A draft which is even 99.9 per cent complete still adds up to no agreement whatever. Any doubt about that was wiped out on Monday in the roar of bombs over Hanoi and Haiphong.

From what Kissinger said, and left unsaid, independent analysts concluded that the unresolved question appeared to be an attempt by the United States to try to underwrite South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu's claim to "sovereignty" over all South Vietnam, despite U.S. approval of a standstill cease-fire that accepted the presence of North Vietnamese forces in the South. Then administration officials backed away from the "one decision" terminology.

The "sovereignty" question is "a red herring," an administration official said Wednesday, and the problem is no single issue. What is lacking from Hanoi, he said, is the political will to fulfill an agreement that is originally made. North Vietnam makes exactly the opposite claim.

It may be that the United States has an overwhelmingly convincing case, if it can document it. Or perhaps North Vietnam does. In the absence of facts, the opposing arguments must be taken on faith. But blind faith disappeared years ago where Vietnam is concerned—an early casualty of the war.

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