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Nonexpectations Of a Negotiated Peace

WASHINGTON—If confusion has been the chronic state of the American public mind during most of the Vietnam conflict, there is little to suggest that its terminal phase will be a period of enlightened understanding. Since Oct. 26 when we first became aware of the sudden hope in the Paris negotiations, our understanding of the situation has become increasingly clouded by veiled or inadequate official statements supplemented by endless media speculations.

Presumably we know what our Government is trying to obtain—a supervised cease-fire throughout Indochina, the return of our prisoners of war concurrently with the withdrawal of our remaining forces, and a political settlement worked out by the contending Vietnamese parties during the cease-fire. In the course of this sequence we would insist that no preconditions be imposed which would prejudice a fair chance of survival for South Vietnam.

As for the position of North Vietnam, we have only its nine-point summary of Oct. 26, but this is sufficient to reveal a wide disparity with the American negotiating objectives. Although we are led to believe that the Hanoi terms have changed in the meantime, we do not know enough about the changes to form a judgment as to what to expect from further efforts to reach an agreement.

In the present uncertainty we can at least record certain things which we can not expect to take place. And I shall offer my list of principal nonexpectations.

To begin with, I would not expect Hanoi ever to abandon the myth that there are no North Vietnam forces in South Vietnam, a myth carefully fostered in the nine-point draft. Its acceptance would have the effect of excluding the most important body of enemy forces from the terms of a cease-fire and from the provisions of any agree-

ment covering noninfiltration or troop withdrawal. Neither would I expect Hanoi to accept any form of effective international supervision of a cease-fire arrangement. From these nonexpectations I draw the conclusion that no genuine cease-fire worthy of the name can be expected under present circumstances in South Vietnam.

Next, I would never expect supervised general elections ever to take place. Communists have almost never been willing to stake their political future anywhere on the one-man, one-vote principle. The proposed National Council of Reconciliation and Concord is a troika monstrosity charged with organizing general elections which, by its tripartite composition of equal numbers of Communists, non-Communists and "neutrals," would guarantee that general elections would never take place.

I would never expect Saigon to recognize the status of political equality accorded the Vietcong in the Hanoi document any more than Hanoi would ever acknowledge formally the legitimacy of the Saigon Government. Nor will Saigon ever agree to a coalition government imposed by a political settlement.

Finally, I would never expect Hanoi to release our prisoners until every possible advantage had been extracted from this priceless asset. When it occurs it is likely to be one of the final acts of a deliberately protracted negotiation.

So much for nonexpectations.

If we cannot expect to achieve a supervised cease-fire, general elections, a negotiated coalition or a prompt return of our prisoners in a finite time, it is hard to see how we can expect to attain our present objective of a negotiated peace assuring a fair deal for South Vietnam. May it not be time to reconsider the possibility and even the

desirability of terminating our American commitment without resort to a formal agreement involving Hanoi and the Vietcong?

We have no need of such an agreement to withdraw our remaining forces, to continue to exploit our air power as we see fit in either North or South Vietnam, and to transfer our share of responsibility to Saigon for the conduct of future political negotiations. And we can do these things without diminishing the fair chance for survival which we owe our ally.

It is true that such a course of action would not guarantee "peace in our time" for Indochina, but neither would a signed statement of honorable intentions from the warring parties if such a statement could be extracted from them by force, threats, or bribes. It would not establish a firm date for the return of our prisoners, but that date is far from firm if their release depends upon the successful conclusion of a negotiated settlement.

But it does leave us with leverage to apply to both sides to influence future events; our air power, the possibility of postwar economic aid for all Indochina, and the need of Saigon for our future support. It removes the fear on its part of the South Vietnamese of a settlement which would eventually assure a Communist take-over. It permits Hanoi to retain the hope of fighting again on a better day, even if obliged to draw back now. Obviously it is not a perfect solution but it offers us a better chance of an early and honorable disengagement than would further pursuit of the will-o'-the-wisp of a negotiated peace. We would come out, if not with colors flying, at least without leaving our colors in the hands of the enemy.

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