

Chronology: How Peace Went off the Rails

In early October Henry Kissinger flew to Washington with a 58-page document in his briefcase. It was the draft of an agreement that he believed—and millions of others were soon led to believe—would lead to a rapid settlement of the Viet Nam War. What went wrong? TIME correspondents in Washington, Paris and Saigon have reconstructed the chronology of events, both public and hitherto secret, since peace first appeared a possibility in 1972:

SEPT. 11. For the first time since Kissinger began secret talks with Hanoi in August 1969, the North Vietnamese hinted that they would accept a cease-fire in South Viet Nam with-out the removal of President Nguyen Van Thieu. A genuine compromise at least seemed possible.

OCT. 12. At a villa near the Paris suburb of Gif-sur-Yvette, Kissinger and North Viet Nam's Le Duc Tho quickly arrived at the draft of a nine-point agreement. It was not yet a full accord; some vital details were yet to be filled in. But it constituted a major breakthrough. The plan separated the purely military issues from the political ones; it provided for an in-place cease-fire that would end the major fighting immediately, a U.S. withdrawal and the return of the American prisoners of war within 60 days, and for the establishment of a purposefully vague political process through which the Vietnamese would work out their future later on. In broad terms, the compromise awarded to the narrowly based Thieu regime a chance to survive and to the Communists legitimacy in South Viet Nam, plus an affirmation of Hanoi's position that Viet Nam is one country, temporarily divided.

The North Vietnamese, Kissinger said, fought for an Oct. 31 signing date "almost as maniacally as they fought the war." He promised to make a "major effort" to get the agreement signed by then, but he pointed out on six separate occasions that the draft would have to be accepted by all parties. The North Vietnamese may not have taken his meaning: they had always assumed that Kissinger was speaking for both President Nixon and the South Vietnamese.

Kissinger returned to Washington with the impression that the agreement could be completed in a matter of days—a belief that he was to retain, through one setback after another, until the very end.

OCT. 13-16. Nixon studied the draft with Secretary of State William Rogers. Nixon's own lawyer's eye told him that some of the provisions might need some tightening up and that Kissinger would have to nail down the understandings and protocols for the cease-fire machinery. But he was pleased, approved the plan and ordered Kissinger to Saigon to sell it to Thieu. The only dark cloud was a prescient warning by the CIA to expect serious trouble from Thieu.

OCT. 18-20. Kissinger and his entourage were in high spirits when they arrived in Saigon for the first meeting with Thieu, a 3½-hour session in the presidential palace attended by most of the South Vietnamese National Security Council. But the mood changed abruptly. Thieu complained that he was not ready for a cease-fire. Kissinger bluntly replied that the peace plan offered many advantages for South Viet Nam and gave Thieu a "fighting chance" to survive—all that could be hoped for in any compromise deal.

Kissinger reportedly insisted that "we were successful in Peking, we were successful in Moscow, we were even successful in Paris. There is no reason," he added, "why we cannot be successful here." At that point, Thieu's young (29) chief assistant Hoang Duc Nha interrupted Kissinger with a short but heated lecture. "So far," said Nha, "history has shown that the United States has been successful in many fields. But history does not predict that in the future the United States will be successful here."

Thieu played his hand shrewdly, never committing himself either way, always asking for clarification and comparisons between the Vietnamese and the English texts. Still,

Kissinger got the impression that Thieu would accede, and so advised Nixon.

OCT. 21. Acting on that assurance, Nixon sent a message to Hanoi asserting that though a few matters needed clarification, "the text of the agreement could be considered complete" and an Oct. 31 signing seemed feasible. The plan was for a bombing and mining halt on Oct. 23; Kissinger would go to Hanoi on Oct. 24 to wrap up the loose ends in a final two-day negotiating session and initial the agreement. Formal signing would take place a week later in Paris.

OCT. 23. At the fifth and last meeting in Saigon, only Kissinger, U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, Thieu and Nha were present. At last Thieu rendered judgment, and it was devastating. He violently denounced the nine-point plan. He insisted on a total withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces and the establishment of the DMZ as a political frontier. He scorned the proposed interim political body, the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord, as a coalition government in disguise.

Nixon, who was already beginning to worry that the Communists might be planning an offensive timed to begin just before the cease-fire, sent a second message to Hanoi. It said that the Oct. 31 signing was not possible because of difficulties in Saigon and asked for a new round of talks. The Hanoi trip was off; Kissinger, startled by the depth of Saigon's apprehensions, left for Washington in a somber mood, conceding to Thieu: "We go along with you."

OCT. 24. Taking his case to the Vietnamese people, Thieu went on TV to emphasize the sovereignty issue, which was to become the core of his objections to the plan. "North Viet Nam is North Viet Nam and South Viet Nam is South Viet Nam," he said. "For the time being one must accept the two Viet Nams, and neither side can invade the other."

OCT. 25. Apparently alarmed by Nixon's pullback from a signing and Thieu's protests, Hanoi broke the secrecy of the agreement and broadcast a summary of its provisions, warning of grave consequences if the U.S. did not sign on Oct. 31. The disclosure was aimed at forcing the U.S. to adhere to the original deal despite Thieu. Scant hours earlier, Kissinger said that he believed there would be a cease-fire in "a few weeks."

OCT. 26. Word of Hanoi's power play reached Kissinger in Washington at 2 a.m. He called Nixon immediately. The next morning, the two met to discuss the U.S. response, and agreed that Kissinger would go on TV to give the Administration's version. The important thing, they agreed, was to maintain the momentum of peace. Kissinger was thus to address himself primarily to Saigon and Hanoi. With that in mind, he hardly considered the elation his words would cause in the U.S., and was surprised by it, he later admitted. Nixon specifically approved Kissinger's language in the assertion that "we believe that peace is at hand." And Kissinger genuinely believed it. But it was also a purposeful device to reassure Hanoi and warn Saigon of Washington's continued, earnest desire for a settlement.

Part of the strategy succeeded: only six hours later, North Viet Nam cabled agreement to another round in Paris. But Nixon did not want Kissinger to hurry back to Paris too soon; so as not to be accused of playing politics with peace, he had decided not to resume negotiations until after the election. Also, now that the agreement's text was public, the President began to get some other opinions on the merits of the bargain that Kissinger proposed to strike—from the State Department, the Pentagon, the White House staff. Not all were approving. Some of Nixon's old wariness in dealing with Communists may have begun to assert itself.

NOV. 2. Something like that seemed evident in Nixon's TV address on this evening, in which he said that there were "ambiguities" in the plan and these must "be settled before we sign the final agreement." Yet privately Nixon decided



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that he would stop well short of trying to satisfy all of Thieu's doubts on the sovereignty question. Kissinger was to seek a concession on the DMZ aspect, Nixon ruled, and if he got it, they then would try to force Thieu to sign. If Thieu still refused, the U.S. would make a separate peace with Hanoi.

NOV. 20-25. Kissinger, finally back in Paris, was confident once again that everything could be wrapped up in a day or two. He got the North Vietnamese to agree on language affirming the DMZ as a provisional political division line. But then the talks stalled, apparently because the North Vietnamese were awaiting Politburo consideration of American "clarifications." The two sides broke for an eight-day recess.

NOV. 29. Thieu's special emissary, Nguyen Phu Duc, flew to Washington to tell Nixon that Hanoi's concessions were insufficient. Nixon rejected nearly all of Duc's demands, which included a massive North Vietnamese troop withdrawal. But the President was still bothered about the DMZ; he told Kissinger to bring the issue up again in Paris.

DEC. 3. Apparently anticipating a breakdown in the talks and a resumption of bombing by the U.S., Hanoi began evacuating the capital's schoolchildren to the countryside.

DEC. 4-13. Kissinger, in Paris again, was still optimistic. And for a time the talks went well enough for his deputy, General Alexander Haig, to return to Washington to prepare to take a completed agreement to Saigon. But then Kissinger raised the DMZ issue for the second time, and Le Duc Tho exploded. Obviously reflecting Politburo decisions, the North Vietnamese angrily retracted concessions made in earlier sessions and flung down new demands.

Kissinger continued to display good cheer for the photographers, but his optimism finally began to fade when Le Duc Tho gave him Hanoi's long-delayed protocol governing the I.C.C. on "the night before I was to leave Paris, six weeks after we had stated what our aim was, five weeks after the ceasefire was supposed to be signed." To the U.S. the proposal was a joke; it called for a force of 250 men to handle a task the U.S. thought would require a force of some 5,000 men.

Far more disturbing to Kissinger—and to Nixon—was a sudden North Vietnamese reversal on the fundamental issue of the return of the American prisoners. In October, the North Vietnamese had agreed to an unconditional return of the P.O.W.s within 60 days. Now they sought to tie the P.O.W. release to a release of thousands of political prisoners in South Viet Nam—a matter that they had earlier agreed to defer to later negotiation among the Vietnamese.

What were the North Vietnamese up to? They might have been hoping to appease the worried Viet Cong by tying the P.O.W. release to the political-prisoner problem. They might have simply decided to agree to no more efforts to tighten the agreement. In any case, Nixon was furious at the P.O.W. reversal and evidently convinced that Hanoi believed he had little room to maneuver. Nixon summoned Kissinger home, interrupting the talks.

DEC. 14. Nixon sent an ultimatum, giving Hanoi 72 hours to resume serious negotiations.

DEC. 18. The bombers flew north.

What happens next? The virtue of the Kissinger plan as it stood in early October was that it really did separate the military issues from the intractable political issues. It is true that the very vagueness of the original draft—not to mention its reaffirmation of Hanoi's "one Viet Nam" position—was highly advantageous to the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. It is arguable that they won those advantages on the battlefield. But the effect of the Saigon-inspired delay since mid-October has been to weaken, perhaps mortally, the original compromise. Both delegations have been sweating to tie the military and political issues back together in ways that would benefit their own sides. It may be very difficult for anyone to pull the issues apart again.

Kissinger joking with Le Duc Tho (right) and aide. With Nixon after the breakdown.



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