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Viet Peace Ploys Are Real Mystery

By BRUCE BLOSSAT

Pity the poor historian who must try some day to chart accurately the course of the serious negotiations for peace in Vietnam which began with moves from Hanoi on Oct. 8. He will have to penetrate the dense emotional fog which surrounds this war.

The heavy criticism of President Nixon for resuming the bombing of North Vietnam so dominates the news that it is difficult to keep good track of even the surface evidences of the negotiations.

We have to remember that the first word of truly hard bargaining, and of the prospect that a peace agreement was near, came from North Vietnam's president in an interview given to an American magazine.

It was proper, at that point, to suspect Hanoi of using U.S. channels to apply pressure for acceptance of specific peace terms outlined in that interview.

Yet the prospective of caution was quickly lost when presidential aide Henry Kissinger on Oct. 26 confirmed the fact of real negotiations and also said peace was at hand.

He did, of course, add that some sticky matters remained to be resolved and that another meeting with Hanoi's bargainers would be required. When the North Vietnamese at first balked but then did sit down for another round of talks, the momentum toward peace seemed only to be underscored.

Here, however, the fog thickens. Those who contend that the whole thing was a Nixon campaign charade won't get much of the historian's time. Obviously something real was afoot, or Hanoi would not have spoken out. What we know too little of is the true state of Kissinger's mind at that time.

Was he affected by the impending election when he put a basically bright face on negotiations in his Oct. 26 statement? Or did he truly believe the remaining differences were minor, and probably easily resolved?

If the first question is answered affirmatively, it still does not make the business into an election ploy. But it does convict Kissinger and the President of giving the state of the talks a misleading tone.

The second question actually is the more interesting one, for the answer to it may provide a truly accurate measure of Kissinger's skills and perceptions as a negotiator.

The public picture of Kissinger is that of a tough realist. Yet it may be he who, on Oct. 26, was being misled. Up to a point, that would be understandable, even forgivable. A sudden turn to serious talking by Hanoi, after two years of empty maneuvering, is easy to overplay.

Nevertheless, Kissinger should need no lectures from journalists on the governing reality: That "peace at hand" is, in dealing with Communist bargainers, not the same thing as "peace in hand."

His Dec. 16 report on the breakdown of the talks makes him sound like a man betrayed, a man surprised at late hour Communist efforts to gain tactical advantage. He should not have been thus surprised. If he truly was, then the deeper inquiry must be why. Certainly history gives no comfort to anyone who views Communist bargaining with even a hint of glib hopefulness. Hope is born only with a signed document, and even that may be quickly undercut.