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A Last Quibbling Scene

By C. L. Sulzberger

PARIS—When President Nixon received French Foreign Minister Maurice Schumann last September he said he wanted to end the Indochina war before his reinauguration (which he already expected) in order to wipe clean the diplomatic slate for major negotiations with Western Europe and Japan.

There now seems to be some chance that this desire may be realized. Contacts between American and North Vietnamese delegations have resumed at what is called a "technical" level and the Kissinger-Le Duc Tho talks begin again Monday.

If there is any logic to the situation—which may at times be doubted—new pressures favor an end to the fighting, at least for U.S. involvement. Whether there will be a total halt to the purely Indochinese and purely political civil war (involving three countries) is less probable.

Washington is certainly eager to get out of the conflict. Now that the Saigon Government has been given an impressive arsenal of ground weapons and tactical aircraft, the White House clearly assumes the South Vietnamese should be able to look after themselves for a considerable time to come.

Moreover, merciless bombing of the North during the December aerial offensive that followed interruption of Paris negotiations has undoubtedly curbed the possibility of any serious resumption of the Hanoi offensive so frequently bruited as a possibility.

Indications are that both Moscow and Peking have been active in trying to encourage a settlement although it is not easy for either capital to indicate anything other than full endorsement of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong. France, which has little power in the area involved but more experience than anyone else, has added its own diplomatic wisdom.

From the American viewpoint, Mr. Nixon is eager to start a new foreign chapter which will prove far more important when regarded by future historians, focusing on the primordial areas of Europe and Japan that can tilt the power balance in this multipolar world.

He also knows an angry Congress is about to assemble on his doorstep, a Congress in which both houses are dominated by his opponents. These legislators have been incited by hostile official opinion abroad where a "religion" of unconditional peace has been widely expressed, most shrilly in Sweden.

And, although polls indicate Amer-

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

ican public opinion is so far less exercised, the influence of important and adverse newspaper criticism, when taken up and echoed by Congress, may well change this situation if a settlement isn't swiftly arranged. All objective factors therefore indicate a speedy formula is likely to be agreed upon in Paris and even truculent and suspicious Saigon seems aware that this is inescapable.

The thirty-year Indochina conflict more or less began during World War II after Japan occupied what was then a French colony. Vichy French, Gaullist French, Japanese, Chinese and small groups of Vietnamese were all involved before Tokyo surrendered in August, 1945. That same month the Vietcong's predecessor, Vietminh occupied administrative buildings and proclaimed a republic.

The French struck back and a series of negotiations occurred at Dalat, Vietnam, and at Fontainebleau in 1946 but, after the struggle renewed that December, massive bloodshed set in. It hasn't ceased yet. The Indochina conflict has tarnished every participant.

In January, 1950, napalm was used as a weapon for the first time in history—by the French. When (after the 1954 defeat at Dienbienphu and the Geneva Accords) France withdrew, there was a surcease of only seven years before the United States, at first tentatively, moved in. The Americans used more napalm plus, for the first time, six-engined jet bombers, laser bombs and new types of delayed-action mines.

Hanoi's generals, with Soviet aid, built up the greatest anti-aircraft artillery ever seen and developed remarkable improvements in the tactics of revolutionary warfare. And what both North and South Vietnamese did to each other by way of torture, throat-cutting and deliberate terror, beggars description.

Now, just as a quarter of a million French troops departed in 1954-5, the last of more than half a million American troops are clearly on their way out, leaving the Vietnamese to each other's mercy, which is not renowned for tenderness.

Whether, months or years hence, there will be a renewed war for that unification which has been denied to Ireland, Palestine, Germany, India and Korea, no one can predict. But this week the last quibbling scene of a sordid Southeast Asian tragedy began.

