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The Joint Chiefs disrupted Vietnam peace momentum

WASHINGTON — It was the Joint Chiefs, more than anyone else, who persuaded President Nixon to disrupt the momentum toward peace in Vietnam last October.

This is the word from sources close to the negotiations, whose access to all the relevant documents, nevertheless, has been

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limited. Few have seen all the paperwork relating to the peace effort.

Henry Kissinger, stung by criticism of his handling of the negotiations, has threatened privately to release the full transcripts of the secret talks. But as this writing, the President and Kissinger have withheld the transcripts from some of their closest advisers.

Documents tightly restricted

Other documents have been tightly restricted and the Xerox machines have been monitored to prevent unauthorized copying. Our sources, however, have been able to give us some of the hidden facts.

The 58-page draft agreement, which Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho hammered out in Paris last October, was approved at first by the President. He sent messages to North Vietnam's Premier Pham Van Dong, requesting only minor clarifications in the agreement and suggesting Kissinger might fly directly from Saigon to Hanoi to add the final touches.

Not once in these messages did the President question the basic text of the draft agreement. The objections were raised after Kissinger sat down in Saigon with South Vietnam's President Thieu. Still, Kissinger was confident enough of a settlement that he made his famous "peace is at hand" statement on October 26.

Advice from the chiefs

But meanwhile, the President was having some second thoughts about the draft agreement. Our sources say he was influenced less by Thieu, however, than by the Joint Chiefs.

For suddenly, Gen. Creighton Abrams, the Army chief, and Adm. Noel Gayler, the Pacific commander, began issuing dire, secret warnings that the agreement would

leave the survival of a non-Communist regime in grave doubt.

The Joint Chiefs urgently advised the President not to sign an accord with Hanoi at least until the Saigon regime received enough military supplies to defend itself. For once the agreement was signed, the United States couldn't furnish new equipment but only replacements.

A massive airlift ordered

Nixon agreed to hold off the signing and sent a cable to Hanoi, asking Premier Pham Van Dong for a postponement. At the same time, the President ordered a massive airlift of supplies to Saigon. The shipments included hundreds of planes and helicopters, tons of arms and ammunition.

There had been verbal agreement in Paris that both the political and military status quo would not be changed in the South before the cease-fire. The North Vietnamese reacted by preparing for a resumption of fighting. School children were evacuated from Hanoi, for example, in apparent anticipation of renewed bombing.

In Paris, Le Duc Tho protested to Kissinger that the military shipments to Saigon violated their understanding and, therefore, withdrew the concessions that had been made earlier. Although the talks continued and progress was made, the Communists suddenly became difficult and kept reopening old issues.

Ultimatum to Hanoi

Earlier, for example, they had agreed to the unconditional release of American prisoners within 60 days after the cease-fire. When they brought this up for renegotiation, the President angrily summoned Kissinger home.

He also sent another cable to Pham Van Dong, offering him a choice between bargaining or bombing. The ultimatum gave Hanoi 72 hours to renew serious bargaining.

The President, meanwhile, reviewed the military contingency plans with the Joint Chiefs, who ordered preparations for the most massive bombing raids of the war. His strategy was not only to cripple Hanoi's military power but to demonstrate that Russia and China would not come to North Vietnam's rescue.