

Joint Chiefs Broke

JAN 5 1973

Peace Momentum



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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 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 at this writing, the President and Kissinger have withheld the transcripts from some of their closest advisers.

Other documents have been tightly restricted. Our sources, however, have been able to give us some of the hidden facts.

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THE 58-PAGE draft agreement, which 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.

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 Nguyen Van Thieu. Still, Kissinger was confident enough of a settlement that he made his famous "peace is at hand" statement on October 26.

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, General Creighton Abrams, the Army chief, and Admiral 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 U.S. couldn't furnish new equipment but only replacements.

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MR. NIXON agreed to hold off the signing and sent a cable to Hanoi, asking for a postponement. At the same time, the President ordered a massive airlift of supplies to Saigon.

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. 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, the Communists suddenly became difficult and kept reopening old issues.