

# Trying to Decide What to Believe

By David Livingston

Last month the United States left the peace talks and launched the most intensive bombings in history. What President Johnson had rejected as uncivilized, President Nixon embraced. Reserving, so far, the use of nuclear weapons, he has applied the full force of United States air power to force Vietnam to accept his terms.

Why did the negotiations break down? Was Hanoi to blame as Mr. Kissinger said or did the United States renege—reverse itself on the peace that was at hand?

The October agreement had assured that North Vietnam would not press its previous No. 1 demand—that President Thieu and his Government be replaced. The United States on the other hand recognized "the reality" that there are two armies, two administrations, two governments in South Vietnam—the one the Government of Thieu, the other the Provisional Revolutionary Government. Each was to be

sovereign over the territory it controlled.

This was the heart of the deal and it involved major concessions on both sides. Mr. Kissinger, after the U.S. election and pressure by the Thieu Government, returned to the November round of talks. He then made a demand that was a total reversal. He insisted on the complete elimination from the agreement of all references to the Provisional Revolutionary Government. He proposed other changes that he must have known that Hanoi and the Provisional Revolutionary Government forces in South Vietnam would find unacceptable—indeed, that they would regard as a demand for unconditional surrender. For instance, the United States had dropped the question of withdrawal of North Vietnam troops. It had agreed to the release of political detainees held in South Vietnam. In the November talks, Mr. Kissinger made the release of Thieu's political prisoners contingent on the withdrawal of North Vietnam's forces.

A central feature of the October

settlement was the establishment of the National Council for Reconciliation and Concord with three equal segments. Mr. Kissinger proposed to limit the role and functions of the Council and to reduce it from three segments to two, eliminating neutrals from any participation.

In summary, Xuan Thuy said that Mr. Kissinger made demands for everything that Thieu wanted. Finally, Xuan Thuy said, when the November round of talks ended on the 24th or 25th, Mr. Kissinger said "if you do not accept our proposals, I must tell you that President Nixon is prepared to go on with the war and resume the bombing." According to the Vietnamese, what went wrong is simply that the United States reneged and failed to carry out the agreements that had been reached.

Is Xuan Thuy's story to be believed? Common sense helps us here. Could North Vietnam have agreed to eliminate the Provisional Government from the agreement? Isn't it clearly against their interest, indeed undeliverable to

abandon their compatriots in the South? In March our labor delegation saw Mr. Kissinger. Even he said that the Vietcong must be part of a settlement. "You cannot expect them to fade away into the night," he declared. Perhaps the best reason for believing the North Vietnamese negotiators is the very silence of the United States team. Did our country launch its monstrous attack because the North Vietnamese were not serious? U.S. spokesmen said they learned from intelligence reports on Dec. 3 that children were being evacuated from Hanoi. It was then, they said, that they recognized the North Vietnamese were not ready for peace. Xuan Thuy says Mr. Kissinger threatened the resumption of bombing on Nov. 25.

Who is to be believed? After all, President Nixon did extend the war and did resume the bombing.

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