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Two Striking Themes in Le Duc Tho's Statement

A BLEAK prospect for the resumed Vietnam peace talks was announced in the very important statement made by the chief Communist negotiator, Le Duc Tho, on his return to Paris over the week-end.

The Tho statement raises the clear possibility of a continuing war. It makes peace conditional on an issue that has provoked a split in the American government which reaches into the heart of the White House.

The signal importance of the Tho statement is underlined by its considerable length and careful crafting. It bears the marks of a document approved at the highest levels in Hanoi. It stresses two striking themes.

First, the statement emphasizes that the differences left outstanding between Washington and Hanoi when talks were broken off on December 13 are small. At one point it says that "on December 13 the negotiations were still in progress and likely to lead to an early conclusion." At another point, it says that as of December 13, "only a few questions were left pending."

Second, the statement emphasizes that the present bout of negotiations is absolutely critical. "Now," the statement said, "the decisive moment has come either to settle the Vietnam problem quickly and sign the agreed accord or to continue the war."

WHAT THIS MEANS is not in doubt. Hanoi is prepared to go back to war again. It is also prepared to sign an agreement along the lines sketched out in the accord negotiated between Mr. Tho and Dr. Kissinger in October. It is not prepared to make any significant changes in the accord of October.

Thus, the issue is up to Washington.

The United States can have peace along the lines already negotiated, or a return to the fighting.

A large group in the Administration, headed by Dr. Kissinger, is obviously prone to go for a peace. They know that the agreement of October is ambiguous, and gives the other side many opportunities for breaking the cease-fire. But they argue that no better agreement—short of surrender by Hanoi—could be signed.

They contend that the force of events, not the tightness of language, gives Hanoi an important incentive not to break the accord in an egregious fashion for at least a considerable period. One thing tending to keep Hanoi honest, they believe, is pressure from Russia and China. Another is the carrot of a generous reconstruction program.

BUT THIS VIEW—the view of the loose constructionists or realists—has met important opposition from weighty figures in Saigon and Washington. These men argue that the peace of October was a phony peace. They say Hanoi will break the ceasefire and start up the war again, as soon as the Americans are out, unless a tighter agreement is written.

Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in Saigon is a leading partisan of this group. Two members of Dr. Kissinger's own staff—General Alexander Haig, the deputy who moved to the Pentagon last week; and John Negroponte, a Vietnam specialist—also believe the October agreement was too loose.

President Nixon was won over to that view. He unleashed the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong in an effort to force a change in the terms of the October agreement.

Unjustified as the bombing undoubtedly was, the differences between the two groups are not frivolous. There really is a serious prospect that a cease-fire will rapidly break down into a resumption of hostilities.

So the period ahead looks very difficult. Maybe Dr. Kissinger can induce the other side to tighten the agreements a little. But even he is not optimistic.

Maybe Mr. Nixon, having given Hanoi a foretaste of what will happen if the cease-fire is violated, can be walked back to acceptance of the terms negotiated in October. But that is not a promising bet—the less so as Mr. Nixon has chosen to put himself in isolation.

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