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The News From Paris

By James Reston

WASHINGTON — The surprising thing about the news out of Paris is that the two sides have been hung up for so long over the insertion of a few words that really make very little difference to the balance of power between North and South Vietnam.

Let's suppose, for example, that the Saigon Government got the language it wanted: that is to say, a precise statement that it is the one and only legal government of South Vietnam and that the demilitarized zone was not a "temporary military demarcation line"—the words of the 1954 Geneva accords favored by North Vietnam—but the legal border between two sovereign states.

On paper this makes a great difference to General Thieu in Saigon for it would mean that the Communist Provisional Revolutionary Government in the South would not be regarded or recognized as a legal force competing for control of South Vietnam. Hanoi refused to accept this language, for again on paper it would seem to be abandoning the political claims of its Communist allies and recognizing the sole authority of Thieu in the South,

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but nobody pretends that the Communist forces in the South—the Vietcong—or the Communist political apparatus in the South—the Provisional Revolutionary Government—would actually be dissolved, no matter what the words of the peace agreement said.

There is perhaps one practical advantage to Saigon in the words it wants recognizing its sovereignty and the DMZ as a legal border. For if the North Vietnamese invaded the South in a resumption of the war after a cease-fire, General Thieu could then call on the United States to rejoin the war in order to help repel the "Communist aggression" across a recognized international border.

Even this, however, is more juridical than practical, for it is hard to imagine the United States, once its prisoners are released and all its men withdrawn, re-entering a war in which the South Vietnamese outnumber the North Vietnamese at least 5 to 1 and have complete control of the air as well.

Henry Kissinger, the historian, saw the advantage of ambiguous language in dealing with the sovereignty and border issues and wanted to leave these issues to the two sides in Vietnam to work out later on, but President Nixon, the lawyer, wanted the language to be precise, as if he were negotiating a contract that would be binding in a court of law, rather than negotiating a peace that no court could possibly handle.

General Thieu has at least been consistent in his demands. He not only wants the Communists to concede that they have no legal right to be south of the DMZ "border," but he wants all the North Vietnamese troops withdrawn from the South as well.

The United States' position has not even had the merit of consistency. For while it has been arguing for recognition of General Thieu's sovereign authority over all South Vietnamese territory, it has been willing to leave the North Vietnamese troops in the South.

Legally or practically, nothing abridges a nation's sovereignty more than the presence of foreign troops or insurrectionist units on its soil. The Oct. 26 draft compromise at least recognized that since Saigon plus half a million American troops had not been able to drive the Communists north of the DMZ, Hanoi was not likely to remove them because of a few words on paper saying they had no legal right to be in the South.

Even after a cease-fire—regardless of the language of the compromise—the fact is that neither North nor South Vietnam is likely to give up its goal of being the sole authority on both sides of the demilitarized zone.

There are some forces working for a prolonged cease-fire. China, preoccupied with its ideological and strategic differences with the Soviet Union, is not quite so enthusiastic about Hanoi's control over South Vietnam as it sometimes sounds. In fact, Peking would probably prefer to see the peninsula divided between relatively weak states, as it was earlier in the century.

Also, the North Vietnamese badly need the reconstruction aid Mr. Kissinger discussed with them.

None of this, however, is likely to alter the political ambitions of the politicians in the North and South, no matter what they say at the end of

the fighting. In this sense, the Vietnam war has always been a civil struggle for political control of the entire country.

And this has been the tragedy of this conflict from the start. After all the killing, all the waste of life and money, all the lying and divisions within the United States as the result of the war, even the prospect of a cease-fire doesn't change the outlook over the long run.

A cease-fire there may be, and eventually even a prolonged truce, but not a reliable peace, for the divisions are too deep and bitter in that peninsula, and there is scarcely an official here who genuinely believes in a lasting reconciliation between the North and the South.