

Out of the Quagmire?

President Nixon's decision to halt all offensive military action against North Vietnam is a promising gesture. It reinforces the cautious optimism voiced by both sides after six days of marathon peace talks in Paris last week between Presidential aide Henry A. Kissinger and North Vietnam's chief negotiator, Le Duc Tho.

Whether this rekindled hope will actually lead to peace—or more realistically, to safe United States withdrawal from a still unresolved conflict among the North and South Vietnamese—no one can be certain, especially after all the bitter letdowns of the recent past.

General Haig has been dispatched to Saigon to consult with President Thieu, whose opposition appears to have been a major factor in upsetting the agreement tentatively worked out in Paris last October. Although Mr. Thieu and his associates have continued to insist on terms Hanoi and the Vietcong are not likely to accept, there are hints of new realism and flexibility in the South Vietnamese capital.

But the responsibility for choosing between a possible peace and more war lies in the White House. What constitutes an acceptable settlement is a decision that Mr. Nixon seems bent on making alone, just as he has made alone—without consulting Congress—all the crucial decisions of the last month: the decision to unleash an avalanche of destruction on Hanoi and the Haiphong, the decision two weeks later to confine the mass bombing to the territory south of the 20th Parallel, and yesterday's decision to suspend all offensive action against the North.

A few days after he launched the massive bombing assault on the heavily populated North Vietnamese heartland last month, the President told a White House interviewer that he was always "the coolest man in the room" when such fateful decisions had to be made. The larger crisis precipitated by that first devastating decision—a crisis of confidence at home and abroad—makes balance and coolness more requisite than ever today as the President weighs new negotiating options on the eve of his second inaugural this Saturday.

The options open to the President are limited if the war is ever to end. It is futile to expect a tidy end of this messy conflict, regardless of Mr. Kissinger's diplomatic skills. The only conclusion cool analysis can bring is that the inescapable risks of an imperfect settlement in Indochina are infinitely preferable to the threat any additional prolongation of the war would pose to the President's larger designs for peace abroad and progress at home.

Nothing could be more auspicious for starting Mr. Nixon's second term than the fulfillment of his first-term promise to extricate the United States at last from the cruel and costly Southeast Asian quagmire.