



The Negotiations And the Bombing

— Joseph Alsop

WITH Henry A. Kissinger back from Paris where he initialed a Vietnam peace agreement, it is worth asking what really happened between the announcement, last October, that "peace is at hand" and Kissinger's latest trip.

It is now clear, to begin with, that some American analysts went too far, in assuming a drastic change in the power line-up in Hanoi last year, after the failure of the 1972 offensive. There was a shift, but not a drastic one. Those who had had enough were strengthened, but they were not yet in a position to dictate to the more belligerent faction of the Politburo.

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THE POLITBURO'S compromise in September-October was therefore to seek a fairly imprecise draft agreement, dealing with general principles but not spelling out details. The hope was that the pressure of the election would force President Nixon to sign such a draft agreement without further delay. Hanoi's aim, in sum, was a much-needed respite in the war, on the basis of a paper full of loopholes.

In defiance of previous promises about secrecy, Hanoi therefore published a summary of the draft agreement in late October. The calculation was that with the election just ahead, the President would have to sign forthwith.

Two things then happened, however. President Nguyen Van Thieu made his famous row about the draft agreement. More importantly but much more quietly, President Nixon independently decided he would not be pressured by Hanoi, but

would instead insist on converting the draft into a final agreement with all details spelled out and all loopholes plugged.

Thus the devious compromise in the Politburo in Hanoi failed to produce its hoped-for result. The balance in the Politburo then shifted a bit. When Le Duc Tho returned to Paris, he had a new set of instructions. Kissinger called the resulting negotiations "frivolous."

That left President Nixon with only two choices: to let the war continue; or to increase the pressure on Hanoi, in order to get a sound agreement. The President's choice was to increase the pressure, and the result was the passionately denounced bombing campaign.

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HERE, once again, the Hanoi leadership had miscalculated. There is ample proof that the Politburo expected the President to resume bombing. But what was expected was only more of what had gone before — attacks by fighter-bombers. If the President had stopped there, the bombing would have been wholly ineffectual. This was the reason the B-52s were employed, to Hanoi's horrified surprise.

There is no question at all that the renewed bombing got the President what he was aiming for. Significantly, Hanoi had never broken off communications with Washington, even when the bombing was at its worst. In the end, a message came from Hanoi to the President, indicating that negotiations would be resumed on an acceptable and serious basis.

The bombing was therefore halted.