

South Vietnam: Its Future Rests on a Fragile Base

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 24—The political future of South Vietnam, at least in the first 90 days after the signing of the cease fire agreement Saturday, will rest in part on a fragile three-party council of National Reconciliation and Concord whose eventual establishment—if it is established—will symbolize heavy compromise worked out in the peace settlement.

As described in the agreement, the council—to consist of equal segments representing the Saigon Government, the Provisional Revolutionary Government and neutralists—would be convened by the Saigon Government and the Vietcong's Provisional Revolutionary Government "immediately after the cease-fire" and be charged with the task of organizing general and local elections and the settling of all internal matters between the two parties.

There would be no direct role either for the United States or for North Vietnam in the internal political workings of the South, a condition that seemingly meets the long-standing United States demand for the "right to self-determination for the South Vietnamese people without an ouster of the Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu.

"If you examine the provisions," Henry A. Kissinger

said at his news conference today, "you will see, first, that the existing Government in Saigon can remain in office; secondly, that the political future of South Vietnam depends on agreement between the South Vietnamese parties and not on an agreement that the United States has imposed on these parties."

Concept Termed Vague

But experts interviewed here today described the concept behind the three-part council as vague and possibly unworkable—mainly because of the compromises involved in reaching agreement on such a central issue.

As first envisioned by the Vietcong in 1971, a three-part government would be established that would "assume its functions during the period between the restoration of peace and the holding of general elections." Once that government was formed, the cease-fire would begin.

The peace settlement announced yesterday includes the three-part concept but reduces the council's powers from that of a permanent legislative body to one that exists merely to oversee elections and resolve unspecified "internal matters" before disbanding.

"You can't even refer to it as a government," one former White House aide who was involved in the secret Paris peace talks said of the council.

"Its life and function is keyed to the setting up of elections."

This limitation on the council's role was depicted as a victory for Mr. Kissinger. He explained that the Vietnamese translation of the agreement—as initially worked out in the negotiations of last October—"would have lent itself to the interpretation that it came close to or was identical with a coalition government."

"You will find," Mr. Kissinger told the newsmen, "that in the text of this agreement the word 'administrative structure' no longer exists."

The major United States and Saigon concession apparently revolved on North Vietnam's insistence that the Communists be permitted to exercise what amounts to a veto power over potential members of the council.

As published today, the peace settlement calls for the council to "operate on the principle of unanimity," a condition that many experts believe will prevent agreement on substantial issues.

'No Understanding' in Role

United States negotiators have in the past publicly expressed displeasure over what was termed the Communists' demand for a veto. The North Vietnamese and the Vietcong responded that they wanted only to insure that the participants in any future coalition government were agreed on neutrality and peace as the basic objectives.

The vagueness of the council's role in determining the political future of South Vietnam was made explicit at one point today by Mr. Kissinger.

In response to a question about the future role of the neutralists, or so-called third-force groups, in South Vietnam, the Presidential adviser said: "We have taken the position throughout that the future political evolution of South Vietnam should be left to the greatest extent possible to the South Vietnamese themselves. There is no understanding in any detail on the role of any par-

"The United States has always taken the view that it favored free elections," Mr. Kissinger added, "but on the whole the essence of this agreement is to leave the political evolution of South Vietnam to negotiation among the various South Vietnamese parties or factions."

A similar vagueness was enunciated by Le Duc Tho, the chief North Vietnamese negotiator, during his news conference today in Paris.

Asked what would happen if the Provisional Revolutionary Government and the Saigon Government failed to agree on the Council of National Reconciliation, Mr. Tho said only that "I have the first conviction that the Vietnamese peo-

ple's aspirations for peace and national concord will triumph and that any difficulties on this question will be overcome."

Most of the sources interviewed today suggested that the real effect of the council will not be in setting up national elections, but in providing a forum where representatives of the Vietcong and of Saigon can appear—as one expert said—"without having their heads chopped off."

These sources envisioned the following developments:

The Saigon Government will attempt to effect a partition of South Vietnam, and will try to consolidate its hold on the larger cities and towns. The Vietcong, aided by North Vietnamese forces, will contest many areas of the countryside not now in their control.

Any immediate authority for preventing chaos will rest not in the Council of National Reconciliation, but in the two-and-four-party joint military commissions, which will be responsible for controlling access to market places and use of roadways.

Even if both sides don't immediately return to armed combat and if a Council of National Reconciliation can be established, general elections as envisioned in the peace settlement are considered unlikely.

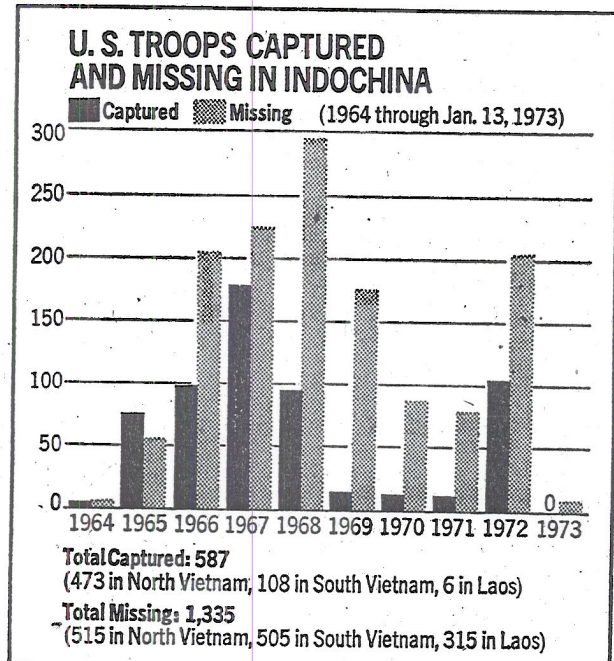
The experts' pessimism contrasts sharply with Article 11 of the peace settlement, which calls on the Saigon Government and the Provisional Revolutionary Government to "end hatred and enmity; prohibit all acts of reprisal and discrimination; insure the democratic liberties of the people: personal freedom, freedom of the press, freedom of meeting, freedom of political activities" and many other individual rights.

The experts acknowledged that, despite effective date for the cease-fire this weekend, it will be weeks at least before an effective Council of National Reconciliation or joint military commissions are set up and become capable of monitoring and settling cease-fire violations.

The true test of the peace settlement may not come until March, these men said, when the season for planting rice begins in the Mekong delta. Hundreds of thousands of the refugees now living in shantytowns and Government-held areas near the major cities of South Vietnam are expected to begin moving back into the countryside in hopes of returning to farming.

Many will have to cross into Communist-held areas, posing an obvious challenge to the Thieu Government's desire to limit such population flow.

Recent statistics compiled by a Senate subcommittee indicate that as many as five million South Vietnamese—about one-third of the population—have been made homeless by the war.



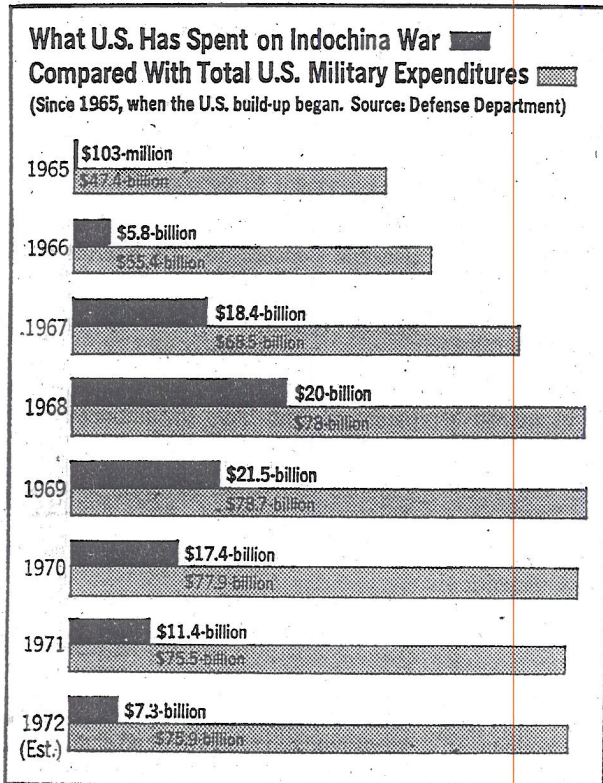
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In Saigon, a soldier joined civilians in watching President Nguyen Van Thieu give the news of impending cease-fire



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