

Look Back In Puzzlement

By C. L. Sulzberger

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Paris agreement extricates the United States from the Indochina war and sets a pattern for possible peace between Vietnam's two halves. But, in itself, it insures neither peace nor unification of that country nor does it seem to guarantee a certain cease-fire in neighboring Laos and Cambodia.

President Nixon and his extraordinary negotiator, Henry Kissinger, have achieved an accord with Hanoi that is open-ended in the sense that it could conceivably lead either to renewed fighting or to permanent settlement. In the former contingency, Washington has stuffed South Vietnam with a massive arsenal that gives Saigon an excellent chance of surviving.

President Thieu told me last February 23: "North Vietnam attacked us because of our weakness. It is a good lesson for us to remember in the future. North Vietnam will not dare to launch a new aggression against us if, after a long term solution, we stay strong."

Thieu predicted Hanoi would agree to "temporary peace" and subsequently try to achieve its objective of dominating South Vietnam "over a five- or six-year period." He forecast, moreover, that "some time in 1973" the Communist forces would "turn their main effort to Laos and Cambodia, seeking a political advantage there."

Certainly no agreement has yet been made public that solves the future of Laos or Cambodia. Should President Thieu's prediction materialize, it would be hard for the United States to prevent collapse of jerry-built regimes in those lands. Mr. Nixon told me on March 8, 1971: "The Nixon Doctrine says only that we will help those who help themselves." That is difficult for Vientiane or Phnom Penh to accomplish, despite any eventual subsidiary accords.

Nevertheless, whatever its shortcomings, the President realized settlement was imperative in what he described to me as "a war where there are no heroes, only goats." And what has been achieved is not unnatural. Vietnam was divided for 150 years along the existing demilitarized zone.

The final push that terminated protracted negotiating came after Mr. Nixon broke off stalemated talks Dec. 13, 1972. He did this because he was convinced Hanoi was playing games, twisting language in proposed draft accords, because he believed North Vietnam was planning another offensive to coincide with agreement, and because he was still having diplomatic difficulties with Saigon.

The aerial bombardment of Hanoi and Haiphong was ordered to reduce chances of a new military attack by weakening its rear bases, and to serve as an implicit warning. It was assumed that, despite negative public reaction, the bombing would prove worthwhile if settlement was thereby achieved this month. It was.

Mr. Nixon's negotiating technique was interesting. He did not give precise instructions to Kissinger on a point-by-point basis. Instead he met at great length with him, between Paris sessions, to review the Presidential "game plan" and discussed provisions essential to any settlement.

Then he left Kissinger on his own. The final result was an accord which was not brilliant but which was honorable and clearly not anticipated by Mr. Nixon's political opponents.

When historians look back on the unhappy conflict with less passion than contemporary analysts, they may see factors now ignored. Contrary to forecasts, it increased rather than decreased the Sino-Soviet rift. The failure to achieve a swift Communist triumph probably helped Indonesia to frustrate a Communist take-over plot. The United States lost immense popularity but, in the end, managed to retain international respect.

American generals never wholly mastered the techniques of countering General Giap's Revolutionary Warfare. The helicopter proved a disastrous innovation because it encouraged a bad U.S. strategy. Troops arriving and departing by air could not root out a skillful enemy. The Vietcong and North Vietnamese became adept at baiting helicopter traps.

Finally, no categorical answer was given to the primordial question: Can a free society fight a limited war? U.S. national interest waned as U.S. public impatience waxed. It proved difficult to convince soldiers (or their relatives) that it was worth fighting for an improved negotiating position in a distant, little-known country. Television, unfettered and widespread in the free world, advertised grisly horrors.

Nevertheless, with extraordinary determination, President Nixon did produce a settlement, even though its final worth remains to be tested. The pull-out is not a bug-out. Whatever comes next, war or peace, it will be wholly Vietnamized with those beside whom American soldiers fought having a fair chance to defend themselves successfully.