

After the Ceasefire: For Vietnam, Some Questions . . .

by Joseph Kraft

LE DUC THO, the chief North Vietnamese peace negotiator, acknowledges that the Communists are still "heading for reunification." President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam asserts that "the South and North are two separate nations."

So while rejoicing in the ceasefire signed in Paris, there are questions yet to be posed. Will the agreement stick? And if it doesn't, will the United States once more be sucked into the conflict?

The prospect is not altogether gloomy. Many forces are presently working to make the Communists stick to the letter of the Paris agreement.

For one thing, there is the international diplomatic alignment. President Nixon's supreme success has been to persuade both Russia and China to support his efforts to reach a Vietnamese settlement. All present signs indicate that Moscow and Peking do not want any new flare-up of the fighting, and that they are in good position to press their views on the Communists in both North and South Vietnam.

Secondly, there is the prospect of what President Nixon called "a major effort" by the United States to develop a reconstruction program for both North and South Vietnam. Obviously aid will not be tendered to Hanoi unless the Communists abide by the Paris agreement. So there is an important carrot to bind the Communists to observation of the ceasefire.

There is also a stick, brandished by the 12-day bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong in December. The changes made in the agreement itself, thanks to the bombing, appear to be of the kind expressed in theological debates about whether the trinity is a unity or transubstantiation is more physical fact than a symbol. But certainly the December bombing put the Communists on notice that, if they break the ceasefire, President Nixon can make them pay a heavy price for the transgression.

UNFORTUNATELY, the only danger to the ceasefire does not come from the Communist side. Another source of difficulty — perhaps the principal source of difficulty — lies in the weakness of the Saigon government. President Thieu heads an unpopular military regime which rules more by force than through consent. It has a powerful apparatus of coercion in the form of military and police forces numbering a million men, but it does not have an effective apparatus

of civilian administration or political mobilization.

Because the ceasefire initiates an era where Saigon is obliged to engage the Communists in a political process, the agreement spells trouble for Gen. Thieu. His military apparatus, which is apt to become increasingly irrelevant, will surely wither through desertion and apathy. He will be obliged to develop a political apparatus.

Maybe Gen. Thieu will be able to do that. Perhaps he will be able to accommodate the Communist demand for release of 30,000 political prisoners. Maybe he will agree with their demand for elections to a parliament that will cut into his presidential powers.

But the odds are against it. Indeed, Gen. Thieu is already moving to abort the political process. He is increasing censorship, restricting movement of personnel, and trying to develop what would be a single government party.

The trouble is that Gen. Thieu's steps to tighten control are sure to look like violations of the ceasefire to the Communists. The agreement could break down through any one of a number of actions apt to be taken by President Thieu. Among them are refusal to release political prisoners, refusal to agree on elections, or refusal to allow resettlement of refugees in Communist-held areas.

A PRUDENT GUESS, accordingly, is that the ceasefire agreement probably will break down, maybe in a couple of months. So the United States needs to start a barrier against new pressures for military reengagement. Certainly it makes sense for those of us who early saw the folly of the war, and who have not a little to do with forcing the ceasefire down the throat of unwilling governments, to be vigilant against being suckered once more into an area where no serious American interest is at stake.

To that end, it should never be forgotten that Hanoi's acceptance of the ceasefire was not the only breakthrough. There was also a breakthrough when Henry Kissinger's deputy, Gen. Alexander Haig, won Saigon's acceptance of the ceasefire a week ago. That breakthrough was achieved by the threat to withhold aid to Saigon. And now as then, the critical lever, the stick to be brandished, is the threat to stop aid for the most important menace to the settlement, Gen. Thieu.

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