

Unanswered Questions in The Wake of the War

By Frances FitzGerald

IN PRINCIPLE, at least, the Paris agreement opens up a wide and clear path to peace. The first sentence reads: "The United States and all other countries respect the independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Vietnam."

Subsequent articles state that the "South Vietnamese people shall decide themselves the political future of South Vietnam through genuinely free and democratic general elections," and that the reunification of Vietnam shall be carried out step by step through peaceful negotiations between north and south.



These sentences would seem to indicate that the U.S. had agreed to

the main principles of the Geneva agreement that it refused to sign in 1954, thus repudiating two decades of U.S. policy in Vietnam and removing the major cause of the war. The accords, however, do not guarantee this.

According to the text, the principal signatories undertake responsibility only for the military aspect of the settlement, the U.S. and North Vietnam agree merely to cease hostilities and to implement a cease-fire in place between two nameless "South Vietnamese parties."

A Truce

While the agreement represents progress from the attempt of both sides to obliterate each other, it is a truce rather than a peace. And as was not the case in Korea, it is a truce that by its very nature must be both fragile and short-lived.

In strict military terms, it is almost impossible to maintain a cease-fire along lines as numerous and as complicated as those drawn across the face of Vietnam. Then, in a war that is at base a political struggle, even a cease-fire does not constitute a standstill, for life, like politics, continues even though the killing stops.

As a result, the truce in Vietnam cannot last more than a few months: It must end either with the renewal of hostilities or with the beginning of a political contest that, grounded in the realities of Vietnamese poli-

tics, can eventually lead to peace.

The choice would seem clear enough. But it is not . . . The accord negotiated leaves the responsibility for working out a political settlement in the south to two parties, neither of which recognizes the existence of the other and only one of which can possibly benefit from it.

American Aid

Looked at in the abstract, the text of the accord would indicate that there are two South Vietnamese parties of relatively equal stature. But that is not the case. The "Parties" differ in size, but more important, they do not even belong to a single class, like apples and oranges. They are qualitatively different, like apples and theorems.

One of them, the PRG (Provisional Revolutionary Government), is a political party with a relatively small military force, even including the North Vietnamese troops, but with strong roots in the countryside of the south. The other is a product of the American pacification of Vietnam, a vast military administration containing most of the draft-age men without a political direction

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except the vague negative of anti-communism.

Drawing all of its support from the United States, the Saigon regime has no responsibility to its own people and no coherent interest except maintaining the flow of American aid. It occupies the country rather than governs it.

And still the success of this occupation depends largely on the use of its great weaponry to keep the population concentrated in a few places and locked in a stage of economic dependency on the United States, any reduction in the use of force must serve only to erode it, and by comparison, at least, to strengthen the PRG.

Since the announcement of the draft accord in October, the Thieu regime has done nothing but resist any language that would fall short of giving it complete sovereignty over South Vietnam. In the future it can be counted on to resist any and all steps that would lead the

country toward a permanent end to the fighting.

With the three months of grace that President Nixon allowed him, Thieu has already promulgated new laws that in effect suspend the American-style constitution of the regime and with it most of its civil liberties, including the right to buy pieces of blue cloth that might be sewn into the flag of the PRG.

Already Saigon has made an extensive series of arrests, further crowding its jails with people who might be expected to take an independent political stance. The regime's energies now will be concentrated on preventing the mass of refugees from returning to their land in the PRG-controlled zones, so long made unlivable by the bombing.

Its efforts will also go into discovering, provoking or inventing cease-fire violations by the other side in an attempt to bring the United States back into the war.

Opposite Stance

The PRG can be expected to take the opposite stance for similarly practical reasons. Its line — already announced to the Vietnamese — is that it favors reconciliation and concord, that it has worked for peace (alongside North Vietnam) while the Thieu government has resisted it.

In the next three months it will certainly press for a restitution of all those freedoms spelled out in the accord, most particularly freedom of movement from zone to zone and freedom for political prisoners (the vast majority of which are held by the Saigon regime). It will press for demobilization

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and the holding of elections within the framework of a council of national reconciliation and concord.

In the near future — that is, for the next several years — the aim of the PRG is not, as officials in Saigon claim, to replace the Thieu regime and take over the government of the south. Pham Van Dong, the North Vietnamese prime minister, put it this way in a recent interview:

"The political situation in the south is such that one must have a government

that reflects the realities. You must realize that war in the south has meant that an entire generation has known no other way of life. There has been terrible suffering in every family. No one has been spared. Families are divided, father on one side, son on the other.

"Those are the realities. One must now try to abolish those divisions and not by imposing our will. That's why national reconciliation is paramount."

Understand the Country

To believe Pham Van Dong, it not necessary to believe that the PRG and the North Vietnamese are more humanitarian than any other group in their country. It is merely to believe that

they understand their country.

After 13 years of a major war, South Vietnam has become ungovernable — a mass of refugees, an ecological disaster and a catalog of social and economic ills. Those who push — or are pushed — into taking responsibility for this anarchy are bound to be repudiated in the long run, be they as wise and well-intentioned as the angel Gabriel.

At the moment, therefore, the PRG wishes merely to call into question the domi-

nance of the Thieu regime and to set into motion the political process which, as Marxists, they are confident will end with the victory of their particular revolution.

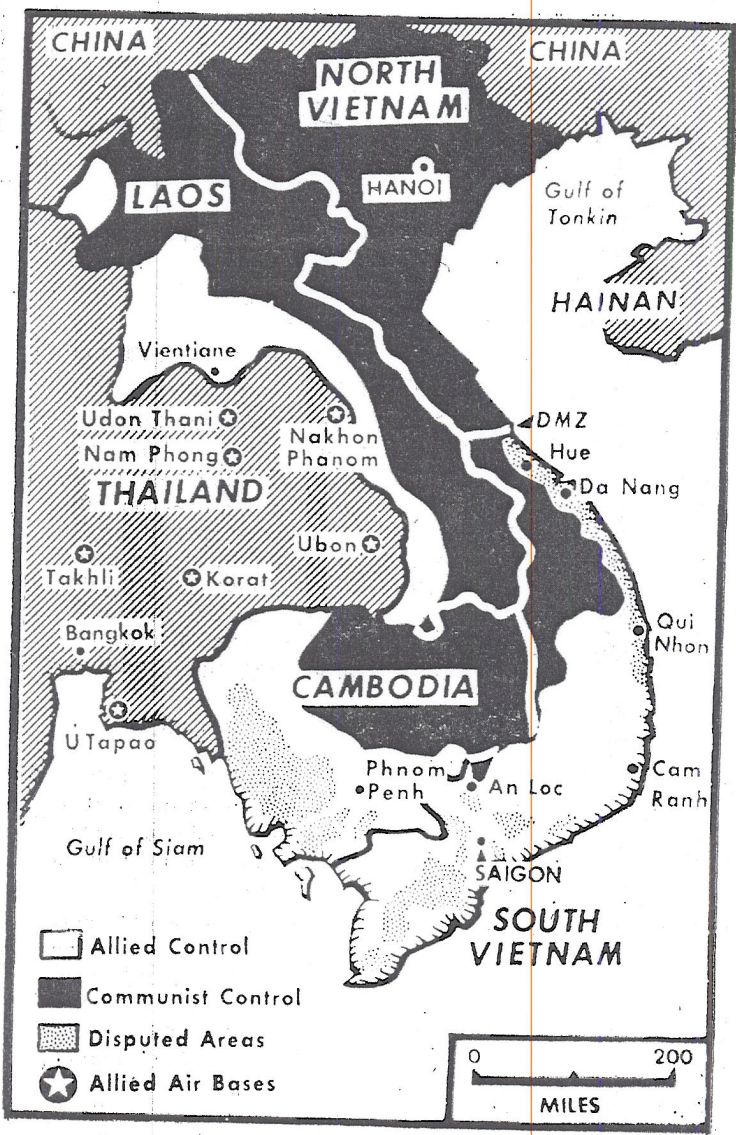
Since Hanoi will back the PRG in this endeavor, there remains only one party to the accord whose intentions are not entirely predictable, and that is the United States government. What does Nixon want?

The answer to that question may not be known for certain for several months. If Nixon wants a continuation of the war, that is easy: he need only accuse the PRG or Hanoi of a violation of the accord and resume the American bombing of Vietnam — a move that no international control commission can prevent.

He also has the option to declare the "truce violations" a matter for settlement between the two "South Vietnamese parties" and continue to fuel the conflict with American aid while disassociating himself from the results of the struggle.

But if Nixon wants peace — peace with honor or just plain peace — he has to force the Thieu regime step by step all the way down the road toward its own dissolution. For only its dissolution will provide the condition for a peaceful settlement and restore meaning to the long ill-used phrase "self-determination for the Vietnamese."

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