PEACE HANGS IN THE BALANCE

Throughout October and November the eyes of the whole world were on Vietnam while conflicting reports of the imminence or otherwise of a negotiated end to the war there left people increasingly bewildered. Much of the confusion arose from both sides' reluctance to divulge the text of the agreements negotiated in Paris by Dr. Henry Kissinger and Le Due Tho, which is said to fill twenty-five typewritten sheets, and from the contradictory statements of the US and North Vietnam about the precise status of these written agreements. The news media, which always feel impelled to publish instant comment on major world developments, contributed lengthy speculation based on minimal evidence, or even no evidence at all, thereby further confounding the existing confusion. The surprised editor of the Saigon newspaper Tin Song, which normally supports the government of President Nguyen Van Thieu, found that the foreign press had elevated his newspaper to the status of the President's 'unofficial mouthpiece' and enjoyed an unwonted importance from finding the content of his editorials reproduced in publications around the world. As always, when diplomacy is conducted in secret, the press was clutching at straws.

CNA readers will recall that the previous quarterly issue devoted to N. Vietnam forecast Hanoi would shortly initiate fresh moves towards a negotiated cease-fire. The reasons why the N. Vietnamese leaders were about to do so were set down in some detail, but it was found impossible to indicate an exact date because of the imminent presidential election in the US. So long as N. Vietnam still believed Senator McGovern to have even a remote chance of winning election she would refrain from negotiating, for the senator was advocating total American surrender. In the event, the N. Vietnamese had abandoned all hope of a McGovern victory by the beginning of October and, on October 8, Le Duc Tho indicated to Kissinger that N. Vietnam has fundamentally revised the terms upon which she was prepared to negotiate a settlement. Why N. Vietnam changed her position has already been explained, so that this issue will examine the progress and meaning of peace negotiations.

The first serious attempt to reach a peace settlement was made by the US as long ago as 1965, though it was kept secret until 1972, when William P. Bundy, a senior State Department official during President Johnson's administration, revealed the substance in an article he wrote for Newsweek magazine. A "private American of skill and dedication"—his identity has still not been
revealed—carried a series of messages to Hanoi's Paris representative during the autumn of 1965. The obstacle to agreement at that time was the communists' insistence on the establishment of a 'coalition government' in South Vietnam first and elections only afterwards. When the US modified its initial proposals somewhat, Hanoi's representative, in the words of Mr. Bundy, "appeared to be responding. Then Le Duc Tho appeared on the scene, and the door was thereafter shut". The conclusions drawn from the incident by Mr. Bundy more than six years later are interesting. Hanoi, he believed, was always after a 'sure thing' and would probably not accept Nixon's January 1972 offer because she feared a cease fire might damage herself more than Saigon. He was right about her rejection of the offer, but the reason for this was that she had no military presence in S. Vietnam at that time and was nearing completion of preparations for the Easter invasion.

Events of 1968, viewed in retrospect, are revealing of N. Vietnam's approach to negotiations. It will be remembered that, at the end of February in that year, the Vietnamese communists unleashed the Tet offensive in S. Vietnam, a campaign of astonishing rashness which turned out to be their heaviest and most costly defeat of the whole war. The American press and television correspondents reporting the Vietnam war, however, portrayed the campaign as a crippling defeat for the United States and S. Vietnamese forces, which induced a mood of near panic and despair inside the US. N. Vietnam's communist leaders quickly became aware of the huge scale of their losses and struggled to maintain the flow of necessary military supplies in the face of heavy and continuous bombing of communications. The military failure of their offensive in the South had unquestionably placed them in a very difficult if not untenable, situation.

The official records of the US Government at that time have not yet been released for public perusal but, when they are, I believe it will be found that N. Vietnam communicated to President Johnson — probably through an official of a foreign communist government—her willingness to undertake peace negotiations if only the US would reduce the range and intensity of the bombing of N. Vietnam. President Johnson accepted the offer in good faith and, on March 31, 1968, announced a 'unilateral reduction in the scale of hostilities' which, in practice, meant that he had restricted bombing operations to the area of Vietnam south of the 20th parallel of latitude. By so doing, he relaxed the terrible pressures on the N. Vietnamese leaders and afforded them a large inviolate sanctuary in which to marshal supplies ready for despatch to the South. Freed from the ravages of continuous bombing, the communist leaders were under far less pressure to negotiate and felt able to delay the choice of a venue for the talks for several weeks until they secured the spot they deemed most advantageous, Paris. There the two sides met on May 13, but the communists immediately demanded the total cessation of all bombing of N. Vietnam and indicated with unmistakable clarity that no progress would be made in the negotiations until that had been done.

Desperate to show the American people that some advance towards peace was being made in Paris—the presidential election was imminent and the Democratic candidate, Hubert Humphrey, was trailing behind Richard Nixon at the time—Johnson ordered the complete cessation of all bombing over N. Vietnam on October 31, 1968. Hanoi had thus achieved what she wanted without making a single concession by intelligent exploitation of political conditions brought on in the US by the presidential election. N. Vietnam's Party daily at once described the bombing halt as "a great success" for the Vietnamese people and went on to call for the overthrow of S. Vietnam's government and its replacement by a 'peace cabinet'. The communists in the South stated "The S. Vietnamese people are determined to overthrow the Thieu-Ky-Huong puppet administration and set up a broad national and democratic coalition government which represents the urgent aspirations and interests of all classes of the southern people".

The N. Vietnamese negotiators in Paris commenced a lengthy farce over the shape of the table around which the four delegations would sit. With the military pressures on N. Vietnam relaxed, the situation had ceased to be critical for the communists despite their heavy losses in the South. The damage could be repaired at leisure and preparations made for a future military offensive in safety, all danger of further air attack having ended. An indication of how much urgency had gone out...
of the communists' predicament is the fact that they did not agree on the shape of the negotiating table until January 16, 1969.

By what they would term "political struggle", the N. Vietnamese communist leaders successfully manoeuvred themselves out of a situation in which their armed forces in S. Vietnam had been very badly mauled, desperately needed supplies could not reach communications, and N. Vietnam itself was less and less able to meet the basic needs of the people because of the cumulative effects of non-stop American bombing. From these unpromising circumstances the N. Vietnamese communists moved to a relatively advantageous situation, free from air attack at home and well placed to exploit Western information media for propaganda purposes from their newly established vantage point in Paris. The steps by which this highly successful change was brought about were well examined, for it is the long-standing practice of the Vietnamese communists to study past experiences and to draw from these lessons which may be applied to current situations.

The Paris talks turned out to be little more than a propaganda operation, with the communist side evincing no willingness to engage in discussion of matters of substance and each side "talking past" the other at an international audience. The communists, hitherto inaccessible, immediately became a focus of interest for all Western correspondents and exploited this advantage to the full to win the propaganda battle easily.

On February 22, 1969, communist forces in S. Vietnam began a series of attacks on towns and military targets at the end of the Tet festivities, which elicited immediate protests from the US that this action was in breach of secret understandings reached when Johnson stopped the bombing of N. Vietnam. A Hanoi Foreign Ministry statement, dated February 26, said the US was "acting as though an agreement had been reached... on the conditions for the cessation of the American bombardments in N. Vietnam", and went on to allege that bombing halt was unconditional. It became clear that the communists intended to act in any way they thought fit, disregarding any unwritten understanding or undertaking they may have given as an inducement to Johnson to discontinue bombing.

For four years the Paris talks went on, exciting less and less attention or interest as it became increasingly obvious they would never arrive at a peace settlement. Peace proposals were made at different times by each of the belligerents, but most of them independently of the talks. As early as April 8, 1965, N. Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Van Dong had put forward a four-point scheme. This was followed by a five-point proposal from the National Liberation Front (NLF) on November 3, 1968. When S. Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu put forward a six-point plan on April 7, 1969, the NLF responded with a ten-point proposal only one month later, on May 8. Henry Cabot Lodge, by coincidence, advanced his peace plan on the same day and, less than a week later, Nixon made an eight-point proposal. So the wearisome business went on, with one proposal following another, and peace remaining as far away as ever. Substantial concessions were made in successive American and S. Vietnamese offers, but the communist side yielded not one inch on their own patently unacceptable position, which forced observers to conclude that N. Vietnamese leaders were still confident they could improve their military position in the future through renewed fighting.

This confidence accorded ill with military developments in S. Vietnam, for N. Vietnamese main force units were no longer present in that country and such Viet Cong units as still survived had been reduced to near impotence by mid-1970. The apparent inconsistency could mean only one thing, that the North was preparing to mount at least one more major offensive against the South and was hopeful that it would succeed. During February 1971, S. Vietnam launched operation Lam-Son 719 against the Ho Chi Minh trail at Tchepone, in southern Laos, where her astonished soldiers found themselves battling against more than 150 tanks and armoured vehicles. That so much heavy armour should be present in such an improbable place—this could not be explained by an intelligence leak since strict security was maintained and the operation achieved initial tactical surprise—certainly puzzled S. Vietnamese and US military analysts, but these failed lamentably to arrive at the true explanation. Lam-Son 719 had, by the oddest of coincidences stumbled on the early preparations for the massive tank and artillery blitzkrieg that was
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North Vietnam accused him of deriving electoral advantage from them by suggesting they were making good progress towards a negotiated settlement of the war. On the basis of currently available information, the charge would appear to be well founded, but it revealed to the N. Vietnamese, if they did not know it already, that Nixon was a more formidable opponent than Johnson. Just as they had disregarded the undertaking given to the US in 1968 when they were seeking a cessation of bombing, so Nixon had chosen to disregard the agreement to keep the talks secret, and had done so to serve his own political ends. He did not even trouble to deny Han’s assertions that no progress was being made, leaving the world to wonder why Le Duc Tho should continue to meet Kissinger if that were really the case.

On March 20, 1972, N. Vietnam invaded the South in force and Nixon soon retaliated by recommencing the bombing of the North, mining the ports there, and carrying out naval coastal bombardment. The calculated boldness of these steps greatly surprised the Vietnamese communists, who had plainly imagined he would not dare to undertake actions so potentially disruptive of domestic opinion in a presidential election year. When Russia and China failed to react to them with anything more than mild verbal disapproval, the feelings of the N. Vietnamese leaders can well be imagined. For weeks the military issue in S. Vietnam hung in the balance but, by the summer, it was already becoming evident that the invasion had failed to accomplish any of its primary objectives. Communist losses had been heavy, conditions deteriorated in N. Vietnam, and the communist side was finding it increasingly difficult to maintain its forces in the field. Against that must be set the fact that the presidential election was drawing uncomfortably close, and Nixon had still failed to achieve a satisfactory peace settlement in Vietnam. The similarities in the situation obtaining in the autumn of 1968 and that of 1972 were striking, too striking to be attributable entirely to coincidence.

1968 was a presidential election year in the US. At the beginning of March the Vietnamese communists mounted the massive Tet offensive against all of S. Vietnam’s cities and towns. When it failed and was driven back, N. Vietnam successfully persuaded the US to end bombing north of the 20th parallel in exchange for the promise of peace negotiations. The reduction in bombing enabled the...
North to re-supply its battered forces in the South and to continue military operations there, albeit on a reduced scale, until the autumn. Then, with the election imminent, N. Vietnam offered full negotiations which would include not only N. Vietnam and the US, but also S. Vietnam and the NLF. All of this, however, was conditional on the termination of all bombing in N. Vietnam. This was done, and thereafter the communist delegations showed themselves unwilling to make any progress towards a peace settlement.

In 1972, another election year in the US, the Vietnamese communists invaded S. Vietnam in very great strength at the end of March. Secret talks between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho had already begun following the former's visit to China, but these had so far made no progress. The communist invading forces again took very heavy losses and did not achieve the objectives they had been given, but the attack had caused Nixon to recommence the bombing of N. Vietnam and to mine its ports. As America's presidential election day drew nearer, N. Vietnam's situation was deteriorating daily. At that point, Le Duc Tho was instructed to activate the hitherto fruitless talks and to secure a respite from the bombing in return. Quite unexpectedly, on October 8, he conceded a number of points in the communists' terms for peace and, shortly afterwards, the US ceased to bomb any Vietnamese territory north of the 20th parallel. Cease-fire agreements were subsequently hammered out but could not immediately be implemented because some of the contents proved unacceptable to the Saigon government. Were he now to follow the earlier precedent, Le Duc Tho would next seek to persuade the US to stop bombing N. Vietnam altogether—and, on this occasion, presumably clear the mines from the ports as well—in return for promises of a further concession from N. Vietnam. Possibly he has already done so, but President Nixon is unlikely to repeat the mistakes of his predecessor.

N. Vietnam, it would appear, becomes most ready to negotiate when a major communist military operation fails, when losses are great, and when N. Vietnam is in grave difficulty because of American bombing. In other words, when N. Vietnam's survival is threatened, her leaders resort to peace negotiations. The question must be asked whether they do so to end a war which has gone badly for them or simply to win a period of respite in which to regain strength so as to prepare for further military operations later on. The two occasions on which N. Vietnam has expressed a lively interest in negotiations have been in the run-up period to an American presidential election, and that is not entirely due to coincidence. Both major military operations were certainly timed to commence some seven or eight months before polling day so that whatever successes they might achieve should bring maximum influence to bear on the election. Both ended in military failure, but the imminence of the presidential election rendered the President more vulnerable and more amendable to pressure than at any other time. This fact has been a contributory factor to the communists' decision to propose negotiations, and it has also played an important part in the success of their initiatives. In 1968 the communists' objective was to relieve acute pressures and win time. During a visit I recently paid to Washington, several senior officials told me they now believe that the greatest mistake made by the US in the Vietnam war was to stop the bombing of the North in October 1968 before a peace settlement had been reached. They hold that, if the bombing had been continued until the terms of a settlement had been agreed by both sides, the Vietnam war might have ended four years ago on reasonable terms.

This year the military failure of the Easter invasion of S. Vietnam, coupled with the renewed US bombing and port closures, came a few months before the American presidential elections. The scenario seemed to be a close copy of the 1968 one and, because the Vietnamese communists are given to repeating previously successful policies, it seemed likely they would once again attempt to interest the US in negotiating a peace settlement. On this occasion, though, their task was more difficult because public talks were already proceeding, as were top level private discussions. Something more would be needed to whet the American appetite and, as is now known, this took the form of concessions offered by Le Duc Tho to Kissinger. The latter's interest was immediately aroused and he readily agreed to the suggestion of a limitation of the bombing to an area south of the 20th parallel. The de-escalation was immediately exploited by N. Vietnam to ease her own very difficult situation. Communica-
tions were repaired at breakneck speed and goods began to flow down from storage areas close to the Chinese border, where they had been halted by American bombing raids. More recently, very large convoys of military material, including hundreds of tanks and armoured vehicles, have been seen moving southwards towards the frontiers of S. Vietnam.

The cease-fire arrangements hammered out by Kissinger and Le Duc Tho on October 8 and the following days remain a closely guarded secret, although N. Vietnam unilaterally revealed 9 points which Dr. Kissinger agreed are substantially correct. These points may, indeed, be selective and may even convey a misleading impression of the whole agreement. It is, in any case, impossible to discuss the text before the whole of it is released. The document, according to a S. Vietnamese informant who has read it, covers some 25 pages of Vietnamese text and is couched in very ambiguous language. For example, the tripartite body to be set up in order to organize elections in S. Vietnam is described in the Vietnamese text as CO'CÂU CHÀNH QUYỀN, a term whose meaning is impossible to define with certainty. CO'CÂU means an 'organ, organism, body' and CHÀNH QUYỀN means 'political authority, political power'. The whole expression could be held to mean no more than 'administrative structure', or equally well 'governmental structure'. Such ambiguities abound, according to my informant, and must have been deliberately contrived by the communist side to serve its own purposes.

What is certain is that S. Vietnam's government is unwilling to accept the document as it stands and insists that the textual ambiguities be removed. While the majority of the points agreed are acceptable to S. Vietnam, others are most assuredly not, and the S. Vietnamese are particularly exercised over three matters: the re-establishment of the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam, the withdrawal of North Vietnamese armed forces from the territory of South Vietnam, and the application of the cease-fire to Laos and Cambodia as well as South Vietnam. Uncertainty remains about the status of the document, Dr. Kissinger maintaining that it is ad referendum, by which he means that it must be accepted by S. Vietnam's government before the US becomes bound by it. Le Duc Tho states that Kissinger assured him that the US would secure Saigon's acceptance just as N. Vietnam would secure the PRG's acceptance.

Misunderstanding over this point may, indeed, be genuine. North Vietnam's communist leadership created, supplied, and has always controlled and commanded the communist military and political movements in S. Vietnam. It established the NLF and appointed everyone of its senior officials. Later on it set up the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), a body without any of the attributes of a true government and even without a governmental seat in South Vietnam. The entire communist operation in S. Vietnam is commanded by PHAM HUNG, a member of N. Vietnam's Lao Dong (Communist) Party's Central Committee Politburo. His predecessor, General NGUYEN CHI THANH, was also a member of N. Vietnam's Party Politburo until he was killed by an American bomb in 1968. It is inconceivable that S. Vietnam's communist movement should disobey an order from Hanoi, so that Le Duc Tho could, with complete confidence, assure Kissinger the agreements would be accepted by the PRG. Hanoi propagandists have, for years, referred to President THIEN and the S. Vietnamese Government as 'American puppets', according to them the same status vis-à-vis Washington as S. Vietnam's Communist movement had with Hanoi. While this may have been fair propaganda comment, it was totally untrue, as one always assumed Hanoi's leaders knew. It now appears possible that the N. Vietnamese may have been the victims of their own propaganda, that they may truly believe President Thieu to be an American puppet. If that is the case, then Le Duc Tho may well imagine the Americans are guilty of bad faith by their failure to obtain a rubber-stamp acceptance of the agreements from President Thieu as Le Duc Tho obtained it from the PRG. But President Thieu enjoys real independence and his objections to the agreements are genuine and deep seated, as Le Duc Tho could well learn in coming weeks.

Talks are still in abeyance at the time of writing, and it is still unclear what the outcome will be. By ending all bombing north of the 20th parallel, President Nixon made it easier for N. Vietnam to resist a peace settlement, but, unlike President Johnson, he has
not stopped all bombing over the whole territory. Indeed, unprecedented heavy bombing has been taking place south of that line.

To judge from the protests aroused in S. Vietnam, the terms of the draft settlement as they now stand are unduly favourable to the communist side. If President Thieu were to accept them, therefore, it is likely that N. Vietnam would proceed at once to implement the cease-fire, but that no longer seems probable. Indeed, communist military formations in S. Vietnam split into small units during October and sought to occupy as many villages as possible in preparation for a cease-fire so that these might be left in communist hands under agreed 'standstill' terms. On November 1st, the day communicated to communist units as the date of effective cease-fire, some of these units were discovered planting communist flags in villages and were taken prisoner without offering resistance. They had not been informed that the signing had failed to take place.

There remain only two alternatives: either the present terms must be so modified as to win acceptance by S. Vietnam, or the war will continue. Ultimately the decision will have to be made by N. Vietnam, but the information upon which it will be based is not available outside that country. Can the North continue the struggle with its ports still closed and its territory south of the 20th parallel still subject to bombing? If the communist leaders decide she can, then they are unlikely to alter the terms of the agreement and there will be no cease-fire. If the reverse is true, then concessions will be made and the modified terms will place more effective controls upon the communists' capabilities in S. Vietnam than the present terms do. In the meantime, of course, there will be much raucous propaganda from Hanoi designed to depict President Thieu as the sole obstacle to peace in Vietnam. There will be allegations of America's bad faith. Le Duc Tho will spare no efforts to persuade the US to cease bombing N. Vietnam altogether and to remove the mines from her blockaded ports. Such tactics are likely to prove less effective against a newly elected President Nixon than against a President Johnson on the eve of his retirement from active politics, though it should not be forgotten that President Nixon badly needs to secure a Vietnam settlement by the time of his inauguration in January. The underlying realities of today's situation are not difficult to discern. Irrespective of propaganda campaigns or attempts to trick the US into stopping the bombing for a second time, the question of war or peace will be resolved by Hanoi's leaders using the criterion of whether, under present circumstances, N. Vietnam is capable of continuing the war and further improving her military position, or whether her interests would be better served by concluding a cease-fire now on something less than the conditions laid down by the existing draft document.

P. J. Honey

30th November, 1972

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1 CNA No. 904
2 Newsweek, February 27, 1972, p. 56
3 Nhan Dan, November 3, 1968
4 Liberation Radio, November 3, 1968
5 Hanoi Radio, February 26, 1969
6 He did so in a nationally televised broadcast on January 25, 1972
7 Hanoi Radio, October 26, 1972

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