The Paris Peace Talks

FIRST, I WILL TRY TO GIVE a short background to these talks and second, estimate where they are now and what is the position of the parties; and also the possibility of these talks bringing a final settlement to the Vietnam question. The first thing is the background. President Johnson started the bombing in 1965 in order to deter North Vietnam from entering South Vietnam and to bring North Vietnam to the conference table. He said that he wanted to have a general settlement and wanted to make a compromise; that he was making no preconditions; even that he was prepared to negotiate about the independence of South Vietnam without any precondition at all and would give millions in aid to Vietnam if violence were given up and people sat around the table to negotiate a reasonable settlement.

The problem was that from the start in 1965 things went wrong because the Americans did not understand the Vietnamese psychology. I was in Washington during the first pause — the five days pause of May 1965 — the Americans paused the bombing in order to let the North Vietnamese consider whether they would go to the conference table. It was a type of ultimatum; if they were willing to negotiate the bombing would be stopped. But even before they got the reply they resumed the bombing. A very few days after that some famous American generals came to Paris and

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we had an interview with them and with non-communist and anti-communist Vietnamese military leaders. It was a very interesting and stimulating talk because these non-communist Vietnamese, of military bent, said: "You Americans have understood absolutely nothing about Vietnamese psychology."

In human relations in Vietnam, when two people have to discuss something, and one suddenly becomes angry and starts to shout, the other will withdraw and say: "Please don't shout, please be calm. When you start acting in a civilised fashion we will be able to talk." From the outset the Americans had begun to shout and become angry and, from a Vietnamese angle, that was uncivilised. They slapped, they hit and they knocked, and that was a mistake. They did not understand that even a servant boy, from the lowest rank in the society, will do nothing and refuse to answer a question when he is hit by his master or a wealthy man. If his superior then becomes a little angry, though not uncivilisedly so, and asks him why he is not replying to a question, the boy will say: "I will speak when you stop being angry and when you stop hitting me."

This Vietnamese psychology is very ancient and has nothing to do with communism. If you want to talk in Vietnam, you should not apply force, blows or bombs; you should offer something and compromise. So from the start Johnson had made a miscalculation when he thought that he could make the North Vietnamese come to the table by force and the whole bombing offensive was a mistake. Johnson was never ready to accept any unconditional cessation of the bombing because of his pride, and stated that he would stop it only when the other side gave a clear indication what they would do on the cessation of the bombing. The North Vietnamese, under pressure from the Russians and from other sources, demanded an unconditional cessation of the bombing. Then in 1967 and 1968 the tone changed and Hanoi said that she would talk if the bombing ceased. So finally the talks were arranged.

Johnson's great gamble was that if he ceased bombing north of the twentieth parallel the other side would still not agree to talk. It was a gamble in this way: After the Tet offensive the cities of South Vietnam were in so much danger that the Americans had to concentrate their effort on certain military areas — they had to withdraw troops from elsewhere to protect Saigon, Da Nang and the trade links and concentrate on preventing the NLF launching their decisive offensive. Johnson realised that he could not both bomb in South Vietnam and continue the bombing of North Vietnam. He would have to concentrate the bombing on the north-east area. He presented it as a general concession of stopping
the bombing above the twentieth parallel. Actually he had to shift
the whole effort to other areas.

He was in a panic when the North Vietnamese agreed to talk. I can tell you about this in a very precise manner — even the French were quite unprepared for negotiation by the North Vietnamese. Some Americans met French foreign ministry officials at about lunchtime. The French officials stated that Hanoi would not talk despite the limited cessation of bombing. The Russians had said so. And suddenly at 4.55 p.m. the news arrived that Hanoi had agreed to talk about conditions for the cessation of the bombing. This means that they had decided in that limited time. This took the Americans by surprise and they tried to delay the actual holding of the conference in order to prepare new diplomatic and military positions to face a new situation which had taken them completely by surprise. So when the two sides met in May 1968 in Paris the Americans had still not prepared their new line and still insisted in bringing forward their main general claims. The other side merely insisted on an unconditional cessation of the bombing. They were not really clear about what they wanted.

The conference in Paris started on May 10 and on May 13 began the French May '68 "revolution". This immediately deflected world interest from Vietnamese affairs. The French "revolution" completely outranged the Vietnamese question as news for many, many months. The Americans made much of the French 1968 "revolution" because through using French domestic problems they could cloud the Vietnam issue. Many other matters also became very important at this time — like the Czechoslovakian affair which was a direct consequence of the French affair of '68. The Russians feared that the May "revolution" would spread to Eastern Europe. The whole thing changed world opinion and brought it into the American camp and the Vietnamese lost their position in world opinion because of the French domestic situation.

So what was the position at the start when the two sides sat down around the table? The Americans wanted a concession, some reciprocity for the cessation of the bombing. They had put forward the term reciprocity since 1967. They still maintained that they would not cease the bombing except on the basis of reciprocity — the other side would have to do something in exchange. The North Vietnamese were absolutely adamant on this matter: no talks, nothing until the bombing ceases unconditionally. So some people went between them trying to arrange an acceptable and intelligent solution which would reconcile the two positions. First they sought an indication of what would be phase A and what phase B of the talks.
Phase A: the Americans wanted to know what would happen if they ceased the bombing unconditionally. The other side refused to talk but they let it be known indirectly that when the bombing ceased they would talk about the political future of South Vietnam. This meant that the Americans and the North Vietnamese had agreed on two steps in phase A. Although the Americans had not written down or said anything firm about unconditionally ceasing the bombing, they would in fact cease the bombing of the North. In phase B the two parties would agree on the details of the conference, bringing together the participants for a future political solution in Vietnam. The Johnson administration—people like Harriman and Vance—became directly acquainted with the North Vietnamese for the first time.

There is no doubt that a personal relationship developed between Harriman and Truong Chinh and the North Vietnamese delegation and that they learned to appreciate the positions of each other. Some of them apparently persuaded their governments that something had to be done to bring about a solution. Harriman was able to persuade Johnson that nothing could be done about South Vietnam if a stable balanced political situation did not exist; the Saigon government would have to be put on the same level as the other contending parties, including the NLF, around the table and it would have to compromise on the outcome, on something like free elections. So the Americans and Harriman had to put pressure on the Saigon government to get it to compromise with the NLF and treat on the same level with it. The Americans and the North Vietnamese would be behind the two parties urging a settlement. But, when the Americans started to urge this kind of settlement on the Thieu-Ky government, Thieu and Ky said that they would never accept it. They said that the NLF were rebels and agents of the North and that they would not compromise with them. Perhaps you remember that at the time of Ky’s visit to Australia Johnson indicated that he was thinking of a settlement between all sections of South Vietnamese opinion—so Johnson and the Democrats were actually ready to accept a settlement between Saigon and the NLF on equal terms. But the Saigon government said that it was the only legal, elected constitutional government and that it would not talk on equal terms with the others.

The trouble with that was that Thieu and Ky resisted American pressure in such a way and delayed their answer so that Johnson could not announce the agreement of October 23 between the North Vietnamese and the Americans. He wanted to announce on October 25 that he had reached a settlement with the North Vietnamese and that he would stop the bombing on November 1, and
that the conference between the NLF and the Saigon government would take place in Paris immediately afterwards, so that he could win the November 5 elections. Although the NLF had been informed that they should have their people in Paris at least three days before the elections, Ky and Thieu delayed and delayed and were finally victorious. The Americans could not announce the conference until November 1, when it was too late. The Republicans were extremely grateful to Saigon for their victory, and the whole complexion changed immediately.

During the last stages of the Johnson administration, Harriman could not exercise the pressure he wanted on the people in the Saigon government. They resisted continually. The resistance over the shape of the table was of very great importance. What both the Americans and the North Vietnamese wanted was a four-square table. Saigon wanted a long table with two sides because, they said, they were resisting communist aggression from the North—the NLF being the same thing—and they and their allies the Americans were the second side. They could not accept the North Vietnamese proposal that there be a round table either, as this too would have placed them on the same level as the NLF. They finally agreed on a round table cut in two, with two separate tables at the end marked occupied.

After that the Johnson administration left and the Nixon administration came in. The whole approach to the conference depended on the Nixon administration's problems. From the start it has been a theme of significance how it saw the question. The Americans seized the initiative and this is extremely significant as the Vietnamese were finally brought to the conference table. The North Vietnamese wanted to know exactly what the Americans had in mind as a settlement. They knew roughly that the Americans wanted to bring Saigon and the NLF together and they had agreed to have Saigon, although they did not recognise Saigon as such as a government. No solution could be reached without Saigon. And that would also depend on Thieu and Ky. The Americans were not very happy about the certain acceptance of the Saigon administration in the conference. They said on October 23 that they would not agree to the conference. They immediately accepted the NLF on a parity level. The sudden acceptance was, I have been told, a result of their surprise at Hanoi's acceptance of the presence of Saigon, and the Americans accepted the NLF's presence the same afternoon. After that Saigon reacted.

The Americans' main objective, and it is still their principal objective, is to win at the conference table where they had not done on the battlefield. They want an independent South Vietnam, an independent nation separate from the North and the maintenance
of the Saigon administration as such, or almost as such. To bring the other side into this framework they are prepared to grant a certain number of concessions in the political and economic field. The North Vietnamese and the NLF waited to see how the Americans behaved. It developed like this: the first thing the Americans asked for was true respect for the 1954 Geneva agreements, which was good as the 1954 Geneva agreement was the basis for anything. They then insisted on the 17th parallel as a demarcation line and agreed to withdraw their troops provided that the North Vietnamese withdrew theirs behind the 17th parallel. So the first demand they made was for a mutual withdrawal. The North Vietnamese have never acknowledged that they have troops south of the 17th parallel and refused to talk about a mutual withdrawal or any reciprocity for the withdrawal of American troops. The second demand of the Americans was that it be accepted that the Geneva agreements created two zones, and, practically, that these two zones be regarded as politically separate. This too was completely irrelevant to the Geneva agreements. It was a fabrication.

Immediately the Americans said that they had to have private talks with the Saigon regime. They at once got into great difficulties, not only with the NLF which kept them waiting, but with Saigon which did not wish to be on the same level as the NLF and even resisted talking privately with the NLF. But behind the scenes the Americans were able to come to an understanding with Theiu and Ky. They explained that through private talks the other side would finally recognise the Saigon government as the legal one, because through talking with the Saigon government they would accept the framework of the Saigon government. That was such a transparent thought that the other side rejected immediately the idea of private talks with the Saigon administration.

The other side then came onto the scene. It proposed that there be a change of government in Saigon, that the government be led by people who really and genuinely wanted to have peace in Vietnam and wanted to talk with the other side. And they indicated, as is so apparent from the recent history of Vietnam, that the Saigon team had been put in power in 1965 to wage war against their own people; that Thieu and Ky were warlords, who wanted to make war and sabotage the peace. In other words, the other side said that they wanted a peace cabinet in Saigon. My certain opinion is that they were extremely careless in putting forward their demands in this way, because they could have done so much more adroitly. The idea that they could only treat when peaceful people were elected to power in Saigon was good, however. The Americans replied that they would not withdraw
their support from, or drop, the Saigon government, which was a legal and constitutionally elected government.

I would like to give an anecdote which showed the way Nixon was thinking. M. Sainteny — who was instrumental in bringing about the Franco-Vietnamese agreement in 1946; who was ambassador to North Vietnam in 1954-7; who was the right-hand man of de Gaulle on the Vietnamese question; who was in Hanoi in 1966; who last year attended the funeral of Ho Chi Minh and who has very good relations with the North Vietnamese leaders — is also a friend of Nixon (and of Kissinger). So he has good connections on both sides. He told me last year that Nixon had told him privately that he would never do what Kennedy had done, drop his friends. Kennedy had allowed Diem to be killed but he would never drop his friends Thieu and Ky as a matter of personal honor. The personal commitment of Nixon is that the South Vietnamese will not be sacrificed to anything.

It is very important to know this. Many people cannot believe that American policy is dominated by emotions of this kind. That may be so — but where we have a private confession like this we must admit it as an important factor in the whole affair. As a generalisation we can say that the American administration, Nixon and the White House, are certainly not prepared to sacrifice the Thieu-Ky administration and Thieu and Ky know this. They played their cards accordingly. So after having explored the American approach in 1969 the NLF took the offensive. I can be specific about this. Since the beginning of 1969 Hanoi and the NLF have shared responsibility. The NLF is the main responsible body for everything in Vietnam seen from the other side. Hanoi remains in the background to remind us that Vietnam is one people and one nation; that the DRV has endorsed and signed the Geneva agreements; that the overall settlement in Vietnam has to be approved by the DRV and put in the framework of the Geneva agreements; and that the DRV has nothing to negotiate or say in Paris. The main actor is the NLF, while they remain in the background. The NLF, then, has the main say about matters Saigonese and South Vietnamese, and there is a great deal of difference between individuals in Hanoi and in the NLF. I have met the people of the DRV many times and the members of the NLF, especially the first team of negotiators at Paris, which was led by Tran bu Khiem.

He had been a resistance fighter since 1955; twenty-six years in the struggle. He is a charming man, not at all a doctrinaire. I don't think he is a communist; he belongs to the Democratic Party of South Vietnam. I had lunch with him early in 1969. He explained to me that they had explored the whole American approach and
suggested that all the problems had one key: the presence of American troops in South Vietnam. Once this problem was solved all other problems would be solved one by one because they were all dependent on this one.

So as early as February 10, 1969, the NLF put forward the demand for unconditional withdrawal of American troops. After that this principle was enlarged upon and insisted on many times. It is the key to everything. Saigon would then have to treat with the Vietnamese.

The two positions were expounded in May 1969 with the appearance of the Ten Points of Tran bu Khiem and the Eight Points of Nixon. The Vietnamese position is: 1) unconditional withdrawal of American troops; 2) a provisional coalition government of South Vietnamese wanting peace, neutrality, democracy and independence and the election of a Constituent Assembly, and 3) self-determination for all South Vietnamese. All South Vietnamese affairs would be decided by Vietnamese and the unification with the North would be considered later. The American position is: 1) mutual withdrawal of North Vietnamese and American troops; 2) a political arrangement between the existing Saigon government and the contending parties in order to bring about a general election under international supervision, and 3) later economic aid from other countries. The basic differences were unconditional withdrawal and mutual withdrawal and existing or new provisional government.

Because the NLF asked for unconditional withdrawal of American troops and because Nixon could never agree because it would be the same as a defeat which would never be accepted, the two parties were unable even to table their respective plans and work out a basis for reconciliation. America had never been defeated in her 190-year history. Besides Saigon was extremely cautious and unwilling to accept a real coalition government.

Immediately after this Nixon and Thieu met at Midway and the South Vietnamese came back from Midway extremely upset. I met an American correspondent who was a very good friend of the Vietnamese ambassador in Washington, and he told me that the ambassador came back saying that the Americans were betraying the Vietnamese; that they were trying to force them into an equal discussion with the NLF and compelling the holding of fair elections. So, he went on, the South Vietnamese would have to delay to gain time, and thus show the Americans that they were being deluded by the communists. It was clear in June 1969 that Thieu and Ky would sabotage all American efforts to bring about a settlement.
The response by the other side, who interpreted this South Vietnamese pressure as an attempt to persuade the Americans to support them to the end, was to create the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, which, since it has been recognised by twenty-five countries, including Peoples' China and the Arab world, who cannot afford to lose face, will not be discarded. This meant that the maximum that the Americans could hope for was a settlement between the Saigon government and the PRG because the PRG cannot be ignored. It is a government within South Vietnam, making South Vietnam one country with two governments. Moreover, the first time Hanoi had accepted the principle that there should be two governments in the one nation and people. The Republic of South Vietnam was not entitled to decide which was the right government.

Since late in 1969 these two positions have not changed fundamentally. Nixon sent Ho Chi Minh a letter in June 1969 asking for a compromise. Ho said that he would consider the letter but he died a few days later and the new leadership in Hanoi had to rethink about the American position.

In 1969 there was a lot of sounding. The French and the Indians and the Americans made soundings through various channels to discover the PRG and North Vietnamese positions. It was clear that the Americans would not withdraw their support from Ky and would not accept a change of that government for a free peace coalition. They even reinforced the Thiey-Ky cabinet strongly. They simply waited for the other side to step forward and accept their proposal for a mutual withdrawal, negotiations with Saigon and new elections.

The day before Ho died, Hanoi and the delegation in Paris made clear that if the Americans would accept the principle of total withdrawal all the other matters would be negotiated and a timetable worked out. They discovered that the Americans were not ready to agree at all. So the Hanoi leadership took the view that they could expect nothing from the Nixon administration and a decisive shift in their position took place in September 1969. They indicated that they would wait for the next President. This means that the war will be waged at a very low level — they will change from military to political work — to gain without losses, at least in the cities, until the next US President is elected. And, if Nixon is re-elected they will wait for the President after him. Hanoi and the NLF are prepared to fight until 1976 or 1980.

Next issue: Devillers discusses the war in Cambodia and Laos.