

Nixon convinced his presidency

NEW YORK (AP) — From the time he ordered the secret bombing of Cambodia in the second month of his presidency, to the unleashing of B-52 bombers against Hanoi at Christmas four years later, Richard Nixon was obsessed with saving the anticommunist Saigon government despite the doubts of some of his closest aides.

He was so personally involved with the Vietnam war and negotiations with the Communist side that when his strategy began to fall apart in 1972 Nixon became convinced that his presidency would be destroyed like that of his predecessor, Lyndon B. Johnson, and he began looking around for a successor.

But he was consoled by his loyal confidant, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who threw up his hands when Nixon told him "and made his pitch that the North Vietnamese should not be allowed to destroy two presidents."

Nixon makes the revelations in his book, "RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon," which went on sale last week, well in advance of Monday's official publication date.

In the end, Nixon reveals in his memoirs to be officially published Monday in New York, he was forced to settle for much less than the permanently anticommunist Vietnam that he had envisaged when as vice president he first visited that country in the autumn of 1953.

But he resolved his own internal doubts over the agreement he signed with Hanoi to end the war in 1973, and those of an angry President Nguyen Van Thieu, by pointing out to the South Vietnamese leader in yet another secret commitment, that "far more important than what was said in an agreement was what we would do if the enemy renews its aggressions. You have my absolute

assurance that if Hanoi fails to abide by the terms of the agreement it is my intention to take swift and severe retaliatory action."

The Vietnam war dominates Nixon's recollections of his first four years in the presidency when Watergate was still only a shadow on his political horizon. An avowed hawk, he saw President Johnson's problems in Vietnam as caused by his failure to level with the American people over the extent of U.S. involvement, and his defensive military strategy.

On entering office, Nixon attempted to take the military initiative by secretly bombing Communist supply lines in Cambodia, a decision he called "the first turning point in my administration's conduct of the Vietnam war." But he also employed the old Johnson ploy, secrecy, because, he argued, "of the problem of domestic an-

would be destroyed like LBJ's

tiwar protest. I wanted to provoke as little public outcry as possible" at the outset of his administration.

As with his invasion of Cambodia in 1970, undertaken without consulting Congress, Nixon was opposed in the Cambodian bombing decision by Secretary of State William Rogers and Defense Secretary Melvin Laird.

But his unwavering supporter was Kissinger, then the national security adviser, who the memoirs reveal matched Nixon's toughness over Vietnam and became the president's sole war negotiator and main pillar of moral support.

Nixon reveals that in March, 1969, "I confidently told the Cabinet that I expected the war to be over in a year" from the combined effects of the Cambodian bombing and his invitations to Hanoi to negotiate. By the end of that year he wrote, "I never imagined that at the end of my first year as president I

would be contemplating two more years of fighting in Vietnam."

By 1972 after a North Vietnamese invasion of the south that initially stamped Saigon forces, Kissinger met with Nixon, "cleared his throat uncomfortably and quoted a message from the U.S. commander in Vietnam, General (Clayton) Abrams, saying he feels he has to report that it is quite possible that the South Vietnamese have lost their will to fight, or to hang together, and that the whole thing may well be lost."

Just before the presidential election that year, Nixon confided to his diary another message from Abrams that "the time has come for us to get out and that we simply have to cut the umbilical cord and have this baby walk by itself. If they can't do it now with all we have fed it in the way of arms, ammunition and training etc. they will never do it."

To speed up Hanoi's signing of the

peace agreement, Nixon ordered the Christmas bombing of Hanoi, "the most difficult decision of the entire war" and on January 9, 1973 Kissinger cabled from Paris "we celebrated the president's birthday today by making a major breakthrough in the negotiations."

At one point Nixon told his diary, "I suppose in some respects the Vietnam story is one of mutual miscalculation." But his satisfaction over finally ending the war, however messy, was short lived. He wrote:

"In a speech March 20 I heralded the homecoming of the last group of POWs and said that for the first time in 12 years no American military forces are in Vietnam.

"In Washington, however, attention was already focused on Watergate. Scarcely anyone in the media seemed to care about Vietnam anymore — not now that the Vietnam news was good and the Watergate news was bad."