

Insight and Outlook . . . *Post 3/8/67* By Joseph Kraft

Next in Vietnam

WE MAY NEVER know whether a chance to end the Vietnamese war was missed during the recent Tet truce. But there is no reason, least of all the President's churlish disposition to justify everything he does as entirely right all the time, to complicate future opportunities.



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On the contrary, the important thing now is to prepare the ground better for the next chance to talk. And that means, above all, initiating a gradual scaling down of the bombing of North Vietnam.

As it happens, there is cause to be skeptical about some of the things now being said about the talks between Prime Minister Harold Wilson and Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin at the time of the truce.

To be sure, the first session, on Feb. 6, appeared to be fruitful, for the British and Soviet leaders broached the possibility of a mutual freeze on the American and North Vietnamese military build-up in South Vietnam.

But almost immediately after the Tet truce, which began next day, American intelligence discovered near the South Vietnamese border a third North Vietnamese division, not previously spotted in the vicinity. The military ran to the White House with that news, claiming the other side was only using the truce to improve its position and demanding stepped-up bombing raids.

By Wednesday, Feb. 8, the President had accepted that view and decided he was going to resume bombing at a higher level. To Dean Rusk there was given the not unwelcome task of justifying the decision.

In his news conference of

Feb. 9, the Secretary of State asserted that this country could not accept the "unconditional and permanent" cession of the bombing of North Vietnam which, according to him, the other side was "demanding" as a condition for talks.

THAT STATEMENT shut the door on Kosygin who, in the evident hope of sliding around the issue, had not been talking about a "permanent" cessation.

Thereafter Harold Wilson could only play for time and (particularly in his midnight dash to see Kosygin at Claridges Hotel) publicity as a peace-maker. He knew the game was up even before the bombing of North Vietnam was resumed on Feb. 14.

Indeed, he has said that chances for settlement were spoiled by a victory of the hawks in Washington. And he has even cited as the chief hawk the President's special adviser for national security affairs, Walt Rostow.

The lesson of this experience is that the President has to insulate himself against the pressures of his military advisers. For it was his sensitivity to their advice that decided him to resume the bombing of North Vietnam before there was a fair test of what a suspension of the bombing might yield.

Thereafter the effort to justify that decision in the absence of persuasive evidence that the other side would not talk, first led the Secretary of State to make points that can only complicate future negotiations.

In the same self-justifying vein the President said a great many things he will live to regret—including, notably, the unjustified claim that the Russians had agreed to negotiate on the anti-ballistic missile, or ABM.

President protect himself against his military advisers? The way, I think, is to demonstrate the limitations of what force can do. It is to show that the United States can achieve its very limited objective in Vietnam without steadily expanding the war.

The scaling down of the bombing of North Vietnam suits that objective perfectly. For interdiction of supplies and men moving from North to South Vietnam—the one original purpose behind the bombing which remain valid—can be achieved by concentration along the frontier as well as

by hitting the politically sensitive areas around Hanoi.

In the process of scaling down from the bombings around Hanoi to a concentration around the frontier, the pattern of linear escalation of the war would be broken up. That would demonstrate to all concerned this country's capacity to realize its aims without expanding the war.

Then, when the moment comes round again, when the present thumb-screwing mood has passed and the instinct for conciliation returns to Washington, the President would be able to use the bombing as a flexible instrument of policy. He could, that is, turn it off entirely without an overwhelming chorus of charges that he was betraying our men in the field.

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BUT HOW DOES the