

Dirksen Backs Johnson on Vietnam, Rejects Kennedy Bombing Pause Idea

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Senate GOP Leader Everett M. Dirksen, siding with the Administration, yesterday rejected Sen. Robert F. Kennedy's bombing pause proposal as undermining U.S. efforts to win the Vietnam war.

Dirksen told reporters that he was fully behind President Johnson's war policy and that such speeches as made by Kennedy Thursday only served to make the Communists "think we don't mean it."

In his Senate speech, Kennedy proposed that the United States stop bombing North Vietnam and offer to negotiate "within the week," with the understanding that once talks began, neither side would "substantially increase" infiltration or reinforcement. The Johnson Administration has opposed a halt in bombing without a reciprocal Communist commitment to de-escalate.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Gen. William Westmoreland, U.S. commander in Vietnam, also criticized the Kennedy proposal. Rusk said it had been tried and had failed. Westmoreland said bombing of the North was vital to the U.S. war effort, meant fewer American casualties and should not be stopped

"for a nebulous result." "The enemy is attempting to win the battle in the propaganda area," he added, "and he has been encouraged by a number of unwitting if well-meaning groups."

Rusk, who testified at a closed session of the Senate Disarmament Subcommittee, repeated to newsmen the main points of a statement he issued Thursday after Kennedy's speech.

Rusk added that, in recent months, "Hanoi has made it quite clear they are not interested in a temporary pause" in the bombing but are "quite

insistent that a halt in the bombing be permanent and unconditional."

He said President Ho Chi Minh had "closed the door" to America's peace offer in his letter to Pope Paul VI on Feb. 13.

Dirksen said the Communists were beginning to "holler uncle" under the onslaught of U.S. military power and this was not the time to mislead them into believing the United States is not prepared to see the war through.

Dirksen said he did not want the United States to

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make the same mistake it made in the Korean War, when peace talks were used by the Communists to reinforce and expand the war, increasing U.S. casualties "by leaps and bounds."

Asked if he was "pretty much with the President," Dirksen replied:

"Pretty much? I'm entirely with him."

Despite Mr. Johnson's efforts to start peace negotiations, Dirksen said "there hasn't been any response."

But, he said, "the fact is that North Vietnam has deteriorated so fast and so badly under the search and destroy efforts of Gen. Westmoreland that they are beginning to holler uncle."

House Judiciary Committee Chairman Emanuel Celler (D-N.Y.) also criticized Kennedy's proposal, saying a bombing pause could produce pressures for escalation if there was no response.

[Sen. Charles H. Percy (R-Ill.), according to the Associated Press, said of Kennedy's plan, "I would prefer that the enemy show some evidence of good faith before unilateral cessation of the bombing." But he added, "If there's no hope of that and we still want to find a way to negotiate, we should give serious consideration to Mr. Kennedy's proposal."]