

Behind Nixon's Decision: More Than Military Issues

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WASHINGTON, April 16—President Nixon has kept silent this weekend on his new bombing policy in Vietnam to avoid overt challenge to the Soviet Union, which he still hopes to visit next month, and to avoid further inflammation of public opinion at home.

But it is acknowledged here that more than military considerations lay behind the decision to resume air strikes against North Vietnam's major cities. Specifically, it is said that the President's demonstration of resolve is aimed both at Moscow and at the American electorate, as well as at the Governments in Hanoi and Saigon.

As far as can be determined from secondary sources here, the important elements of Mr. Nixon's calculations are as follows:

¶The President is portrayed

as deeply disturbed by the apparently indirect but nonetheless vital Soviet support for the extensive North Vietnamese attack on South Vietnam. The timing of the offensive, though probably not determined by Moscow, had the effect of making the United States appear weak and failing in Indochina at the very moment when Mr. Nixon was heading for the Soviet Union to conclude new agreements on arms control, trade and credits, and European security.

¶If, despite the atmosphere of summitry, the Soviet leaders insist on giving maximum support to their ally in North Vietnam, the President is said to be convinced that he can do no less for his ally in the South. The extended bombing may chill the mood of the

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scheduled visit to Moscow, due to start May 22, but no more than it was already chilled for Mr. Nixon by the Soviet support for the North Vietnamese challenge. From study of Soviet statements Mr. Nixon assumes that the Russians share his eagerness to avoid the collapse of a promising meeting. It is thought that he may have conveyed that eagerness directly to the Kremlin in recent days, but there is no confirmation of any secret.

¶Mr. Nixon is said to have feared that if there was no resolute response to the North Vietnamese offensive, there would be an angry domestic political reaction to the scheduled agreement with Moscow on arms control — a reaction possibly fed by an already unenthusiastic group of military advisors on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He is also said to have feared an adverse reaction to his plan to give the Russians credits to finance trade expansion.

¶Moscow aside, Mr. Nixon is said to believe that the North Vietnamese needed a firm reminder that the continuing withdrawal of American forces from South Vietnam and disillusion with the war in the United States would not assure them of immunity from heavy air attack in the foreseeable future. The raids at Hanoi and Haiphong, like the invasions of Cambodia and Laos in 1970 and 1971, were intended to serve notice that even diminishing American resources could exact a heavy price for military offensives.

¶The raids were intended also, it is said, to give psychological as well as military support to the South Vietnamese Government, whose troops are described here as performing well above expectation.

Finally, in strictly military terms, the attacks are said to have been designed to gain time. They are expected to have little or no effect on the current fighting in South Vietnam but are said to promise battlefield

benefits between June and Election Day. The destruction of fuel supplies and depots around Hanoi and Haiphong will be felt by troops farther south in about two months, officials here say. Strikes against truck yards and other targets should be felt at the front in the months thereafter, it is said.

Direct Challenge Discouraged

Mr. Nixon is believed to have been persuaded that the "pitiful, helpless giant" speech with which he justified the invasion of Cambodia two years ago was a serious mistake, even though the invasion itself was not. Though many of the same motives inspired his new bombing policy, he was cautioned against a direct rhetorical challenge to the Soviet Union and the kind of belligerent statement that might rekindle protest in an already war-weary electorate at home.

Accordingly, he has not involved himself in any of the Administration comments on the fighting. He has twice reproached the Russians for encouraging and aiding Hanoi, indirectly. He has even said—in Canada Friday—that arms control and other accords have little value so long as "the aggressive use of existing weapons is encouraged."

He has left the revelation of his bombing strategy to the Saigon commanders and has kept the comment of the State and Defense Departments to a minimum. He has held back to let the public grow accustomed to the new bombing, to let the Russians choose the level and tenor of their response, and to let his Democratic rivals take positions without benefit of guidance or explanation from the White House.

Massive bombing has always been the last available weapon in President Nixon's Vietnam arsenal as he withdraws Americans from combat there. He has warned all along that he would use it, and he has exhorted both Moscow and Peking to the effect that if they could not help negotiate an end to the fighting they at least urge restraint on Hanoi.

Indeed, the President scheduled his meetings in Peking and Moscow in this election year with the hope that the improved international atmosphere would becalm the Indochina front.

Warnings by Peking Reported the Chinese to the obvious an-

noyance of the North Vietnamese, tried to warn them against a frontal assault during Mr. Nixon's year of political vulnerability. The Russians' apparent unwillingness to give similar advice has been particularly nettling to him, it is said.

The early reactions make it virtually impossible to predict the consequences of the President's decision. Much will depend on how frequent and how extensive the air strikes are in the coming weeks and whether the attacking planes can avoid direct damage to Soviet and other foreign shipping in the Haiphong harbor.

The first Soviet comment, issued today, was read here as relatively restrained, and perhaps awaiting more detailed reports from Hanoi and a full meeting of the Soviet leaders. The Russians have shown themselves so eager to include their treaty with West Germany and the agreements with Mr. Nixon that the Administration would be very much surprised if the bombings—at least those conducted so far—caused Moscow to cancel its invitation.

Strong statements of opposition to the raids from most Democratic candidates for the Presidency had been expected by the White House, but the course of the fighting is deemed to be of much greater importance to Mr. Nixon's chances of re-election.

For the moment, it is said, Mr. Nixon feels himself challenged and tested again, and the posture he continues to value—both in the world and before the public at home—is that of the leader who, when pushed, will almost always push back.