

Mr. Nixon's Temper

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WASHINGTON

WASHINGTON, April 18—The Administration is talking and acting tough against North Vietnam these days, but the evidence behind the scenes here is that this is a temporary expression of Presidential frustration and anger rather than a calculated plan to force a showdown with the Soviet Union in Indochina.

Mr. Nixon has always had a tendency to make some dramatic move whenever he feels concerned or scorned. This is what he did in the sudden strikes at Cambodia and Laos, and this is what he has done again by bombing the outskirts of Hanoi and Haiphong after North Vietnam's invasion of the South.

But the latest talk by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird about not ruling out any attacks on the North, even the mining of Haiphong harbor, should probably be put in the category of psychological warfare rather than interpreted as any reckless new war plan. For Mr. Nixon usually cools down after he blows off, especially when calmer minds begin working on the problem.

There is no doubt that the Soviets goaded him by increasing substantially their shipments of T-54 heavy tanks, mobile anti-aircraft batteries, and SAM's to North Vietnam, and it is scarcely credible, considering the recent visits of high-ranking Soviet military officers to Hanoi, that Moscow did not know all about or help plan the North Vietnamese invasion across the DMZ.

When this invasion was first launched, the official line out of the State Department was that the Soviets were to blame; but Henry Kissinger, the President's security adviser, thought that this was an unwise tack to take just before the President was hoping to reach agreements with the Soviet leaders on strategic arms, trade, European security and space in Moscow next month. And it is understood that he recommended that the emphasis on the Soviet arms shipments be dropped.

Nevertheless, a few days later the President himself revived the theme in a speech in Ottawa, ordered the strikes on Hanoi and Haiphong, and took his chances of the Soviet reaction.

Since then, Secretary Laird has been giving the Senate Foreign Relations Committee a puzzling explanation of the situation. First, he spoke of the massive shipments of Soviet arms to Hanoi, and repeatedly complained that while the United States was placing "restraints" on its arms shipments to Saigon, Moscow was not adopting a comparable system of restraints on its arms shipments to North Vietnam.

This is a very odd argument, since Mr. Laird also conceded before the same committee that the South Vietnamese Air Force now had over 1,000 American planes, over 500 American helicopters, and an air contingent of 40,000 men, with adequate pilots trained in the United States.

Mr. Laird did say that Washington had not given Saigon the capacity to bomb Hanoi and Haiphong, but he said nothing about the fact that Moscow had not given Hanoi the capacity to bomb South Vietnam. Moreover, the United States is now catapulting bombers night and day off the decks of four carriers operating against North Vietnam out of the South China Sea. And since Moscow obviously has surface-to-sea torpedoes and rockets which could reach these carriers but has not given them to Hanoi (though it did give some to Cairo) somebody in Moscow must be putting some restraints on the supplies to North Vietnam.

To hear Mr. Laird tell it, the South Vietnamese have fought very well against the Communist invasion, and have proved the Administration's Vietnamization program is working. Saigon, he said, now had the fourth largest air force in the free world. It had fought well in the air, carried out all the air reinforcements at Anloc, knocked out over 100 heavy Soviet tanks in one battle, and was now able to take care of itself on the ground with an army of over a million men.

In which case, the committee members wanted to know, why this renewal of massive U.S. bombing in the North, why all the B-52 strikes in support of the Saigon troops in the South, and the risk of bombing oil depots in Hanoi and Haiphong which could not affect the present battle?

Mr. Laird's answer was that these were necessary to assure the withdrawal of the American troops, and to react to the massive act of aggression across the DMZ. This last reason probably comes nearer the mark. Let them get away with that, and they might try anything.

The committee seemed to think there was some logic to this, but bombing Hanoi and Haiphong to assure the withdrawal of the troops merely brought the response: Who's keeping them from withdrawing?

The truth is that, despite all the fear that the war was going into another even more serious and dangerous phase, the United States, even during the battle, has been pulling the troops out at a rate of 1,000 a day and withdrawing war matériel at the rate of 130,000 tons a month.

The invasion, of course, is not over and North Vietnam still has 110,000 troops fighting in South Vietnam. Moreover, it will be surprising if the Soviet Union and China do not increase their shipments to Hanoi after Mr. Nixon's renewal of the air war.

After all, their reaction to Mr. Nixon's other sudden lurches at Cambodia and Laos didn't teach them not to trifle with Nixon. They merely let him cool down and pull back and then gave Hanoi more and newer weapons than ever before. And this is still Mr. Nixon's problem.