

The 1968 Understanding: Its Meaning Is in Dispute

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WASHINGTON, April 19 — The outcry over the bombing raids Hanoi and Haiphong has made it clear that the Nixon Administration's interpretation of the 1968 understanding between the United States and North Vietnam differs from that of Johnson Administration officials who negotiated the arrangement as the basis for halting the bombing.

The running controversy as to what the so-called understanding was about and whether it even exists was renewed yesterday by Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He justified the renewal bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong largely on the ground that North Vietnam had committed a "flagrant, massive violation" of the 1968 understanding when it attacked across the demilitarized zone toward the cities of Quang Tri and Hue early this month.

In debate on the Senate floor today defenders of the Administration cited the same justification.

Critics of the Administration's actions argue that the understanding no longer has any real meaning and that the Administration uses it as a convenient ploy to justify raids on the North in pursuit of Vietnamization. The policy of Vietnamization seeks to preserve an anti-Communist government in Saigon by building an army capable of holding its own against the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong.

The controversy remains beyond independent resolution because the written record of the understanding, negotiated in Paris in 1968, is still classified secret and lies in the files of the Government and the Foreign Relations Committee. Mr. Laird referred to that record yesterday.

Harriman Has No Copy

The two senior negotiators for the Johnson Administration, W. Averell Harriman and Cyrus R. Vance, said in telephone interviews that they did not possess copies of the record, which apparently consists of a report on the negotiations cabled to Washington. The Nixon Administration said that it did not intend to declassify its copy and the Foreign Relations Committee declined to make public

that part of the record that it has obtained.

As far as can be ascertained from statements by both Johnson Administration and Nixon Administration officials, the understanding was designed to limit the scope of the fighting while a political settlement of the war was negotiated. Washington and the Saigon Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu were to be on one side and Hanoi and the National Liberation Front on the other side.

In exchange for the halt in the bombing of the North, announced by President Johnson on Oct. 31, 1968, Hanoi is said to have agreed to an "understanding" that it would not take military advantage of the demilitarized zone and that its forces would not shell the principal cities in the South. Hanoi is also said to have agreed to accept the participation of Saigon in the substantive negotiations to follow the halt, while Washington would see that the Saigon Government accepted the participation of the Vietcong.

There was also a collateral and apparently somewhat separate understanding that the United States would continue to conduct unarmed reconnaissance flights over the North to monitor military preparations.

Hanoi Denies Accord

Hanoi has since denied accepting any understanding in exchange for the bombing halt, but its diplomats in Paris tacitly acknowledged the understanding at the time of President Johnson's announcement.

Part of it broke down immediately when Saigon blaked at the participation of the Vietcong—dragged on for months, and serious discussions involving all four parties did not take place until after Mr. Nixon assumed office in January, 1969.

In an interview yesterday Mr. Harriman contended that after the bombing ceased "the other side did show its general goodwill by removing 90 per cent of its forces from the two northernmost provinces and took them 200 miles above the DMZ."

But 1969 and 1970 saw two developments that changed the Nixon Administration's public interpretation of the understanding from that held by the members of the Johnson Administration who had negotiated it:

First, the Paris talks became increasingly stalemated over the demands of both sides. Sec-

ond, the gradual withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam—from a peak of 543,000 men in 1969 to a current level of about 80,000—which Mr. Nixon undertook to buy time and domestic political credit for his Vietnamization policy, forced his Administration into greater and greater reliance on air power to support the South Vietnamese.

New Style in Raids

In March, 1970, the Administration launched what it called "reinforced protective reaction" and "limited duration" air raids on North Vietnam. By December, 1970, the increasingly frequent strikes brought questions about the policy, which Mr. Nixon answered at a news conference then with what appeared to be the new interpretation of the 1968 understanding.

After warning that if American reconnaissance planes over the North were fired upon he would order the destruction of the anti-aircraft sites, he declared:

"Beyond that, there is another understanding with regard to the bombing of North Vietnam. If, as a result of my conclusion that the North Vietnamese, by their infiltration, threaten our remaining forces, if they thereby develop a capa-

city and proceed possibly to use that capacity to increase the level of fighting in South Vietnam, then I will order the bombing of military sites in North Vietnam, the passes that lead from North Vietnam into South Vietnam, the military complexes, the military supply lines.

"That will be the reaction that I shall take. I trust that that is not necessary. But let there be no misunderstanding with regard to this President's understanding about either reconnaissance flights or about a step-up in activities."

Having It Both Ways

It is this statement to which Mr. Nixon's critics point when they contend that his administration is now having the 1968 understanding both ways—disregarding its restriction on American air attacks and then citing North Vietnamese violations as a justification to bomb.

Mr. Harriman said yesterday, as has Clark M. Clifford, Secretary of Defense in the Johnson Administration, that the understanding did not cover any increase in North Vietnamese infiltration into the South or a general rise in the level of fighting there. Thus, it is contended, the United States acquired no right to bomb North Vietnam on the basis of either.

Mr. Harriman asserted, as did Mr. Clifford, that Mr. Nixon had developed his own understanding to permit him to bomb freely.

"It's a little late now to cite an understanding that you've already repudiated," Mr. Harriman said. "He said that regardless of what the understanding was, he was going to take what action he saw fit."

Before the current raids in response to the North Vietnamese offensive, the Administration launched 10 major raids into North Vietnam, ranging from more than 100 sorties over two days in March, 1970, to 1,000 sorties over five days last December. A sortie is a flight by a single plane.

Pentagon spokesmen, no longer describing the raids as "reinforced protective reaction" or "limited duration" attacks, simply call them "strikes."