

1972: Where Are We Going?

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Dec. 30—Nineteen hundred and seventy-one went out with a bang and a doubt. Between Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve, President Nixon appealed first for human peace and pity, and then ordered the heaviest bombing of North Vietnam in over three years, and nobody was quite able to reconcile the gentle words and the destructive bombs.

It is a curious business: Peace on earth and pass the ammunition! But that's the way 1971 was in this perplexing city. It started with Mr. Nixon proclaiming a New American Revolution of individual freedom and predicting a vast increase in the G.N.P. and it ended with wage and price controls and the largest peacetime deficit in American history.

Still, it is easier to understand Mr. Nixon's new economic policy and his new China policy—even to congratulate him on both—than to understand his sudden violent lunge at North Vietnam during Christmas week.

His military dilemma in Vietnam is clear enough: The more men he brings home, the more vulnerable are the men who remain and, therefore, the greater the President's responsibility to protect his dwindling army.

Hanoi also has a dilemma: The more Mr. Nixon withdraws from the ground fighting and relies on air power, the more it presses the Soviets for air defense and sends Russian MIG fighters into the air to challenge the attacking American bombers. But this doesn't resolve the dilemmas; it only deepens them.

For the more Mr. Nixon bombs North Vietnam, the more determined the enemy will be to take a nasty nip at the American expeditionary force as it leaves; and the more he bombs from the United States aircraft carriers, the more Hanoi will be asking for the sophisticated missiles Moscow gave the Egyptians in order to attack and neutralize the highly vulnerable United States carriers in the South China Sea.

It has been clear now for years that Moscow and Peking are not going to allow American power to overwhelm the North Vietnamese—this is one of the very few things Communist Russia and Communist China agree on—and that they are going to give Hanoi the weapons essential to combat whatever weapons the United States uses against them.

Mr. Nixon knows this better than anybody else. He has known for a long time that the North Vietnamese were gathering an air defense. He had his associates warn the press here about it as soon as Hanoi put its MIG's into the air. But there is no evidence that Hanoi's MIG's presented an immediate

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danger to the American command—it was almost painful to watch Secretary of Defense Laird searching for words to justify the Christmas raids on North Vietnam—so presumably there must be some other explanation for the sudden launching of hundreds of United States bombers over North Vietnam during the Christmas festival.

One can only guess at the explanation, because at the end of Mr. Nixon's third year in office, there is an almost complete breakdown of trustful communication between the Administration and the press. But the pattern of action by the President, especially when he has suffered an important diplomatic or strategic reverse—such as he has just sustained in the Indian-Pakistani conflict—is fairly obvious.

If you study his self-revealing book, "Six Crises," you get at least an inkling of his psychology. When he loses, he lashes back, which in some cases is an admirable quality; otherwise he would have vanished politically after his defeat by Kennedy in 1960 and his humiliating defeat by Pat Brown in the California gubernatorial race of 1962. But, as in his blow-up against the press after losing to Brown, when he announced his "last press-conference," sometimes he goes too far.

In adversity, he has a weakness for the dramatic gesture. Are things going badly in Vietnam? Suddenly he invades Cambodia and later Laos. Does he look impotent after the failure of his diplomacy in the Indian-Pakistani war, with Russia now favored in India and his Pakistani friends in retirement and disgrace? Well, don't take Richard Nixon for granted. Unpredictability is sometimes a virtue.

He covers his failures with action. When in trouble in one field, divert attention to another. Are the headlines stressing the powerlessness of America in India and Pakistan? Demonstrate American air power in Vietnam. But in any event, change the question and dominate the news!

In the short run, it is a brilliant demonstration of political tactics, and his old adversaries in press and television are patsies for the dramatic maneuver and give it the big headline; but every bang leaves its doubt, and every successful maneuver, even when it commands the headlines, leaves a drop of poison.

And this is where we are at the beginning of the New Year—or so it seems here—alive, but confused and divided. And the paradox of it is that the New Year is a Presidential election year, and the central issue of the election may very well be between the men who are clever and the men who can be trusted.