

Nixon in 1972

'It was the strongest action to get Hanoi to talk'



The downtown rail station

Nixon's Order to

New York

Richard M. Nixon says that the decision to bomb the Hanoi area during Christmas week of 1972 was his most difficult of the whole war, but "it was also one of the most clear-cut and necessary ones."

In the fourth of seven installments from his memoirs, the former President provides some additional details on the final stages of the diplomacy that led to the Vietnam cease-fire agreement.

He relates how, with the backing of his top adviser, Henry Kissinger, he not only ordered heavy bombing after North Vietnam seemed to him to stall at the negotiating table, but also issued a virtual ultimatum to the South Vietnamese government to accept whatever terms Washington worked out with Hanoi.

The outline of this dual approach was already known, but Nixon's account supplies his rationale.

In October 1972, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, the North Vietnamese negotiator, secretly made considerable progress toward an agreement that would end the fighting and provide for the withdrawal of the remaining American forces and for the release of prisoners.

Kissinger, at a famous news conference late that month, said, "Peace is at hand."



UPI Telephoto

Kissinger's 'peace at hand' speech, October, 1972

But in early December, the peace talks in Paris ran into problems, as Kissinger found it increasingly difficult to reconcile the differences between South and North Vietnam.

According to Nixon, on December 13 Le Duc Tho "made it clear at the Vietnam peace talks in Paris that he had no intention of reaching an agreement."

Kissinger "and I completely agreed on the cynicism and perfidy of the North Vietnamese," he says. And he says that Kissinger described the North Vietnamese in



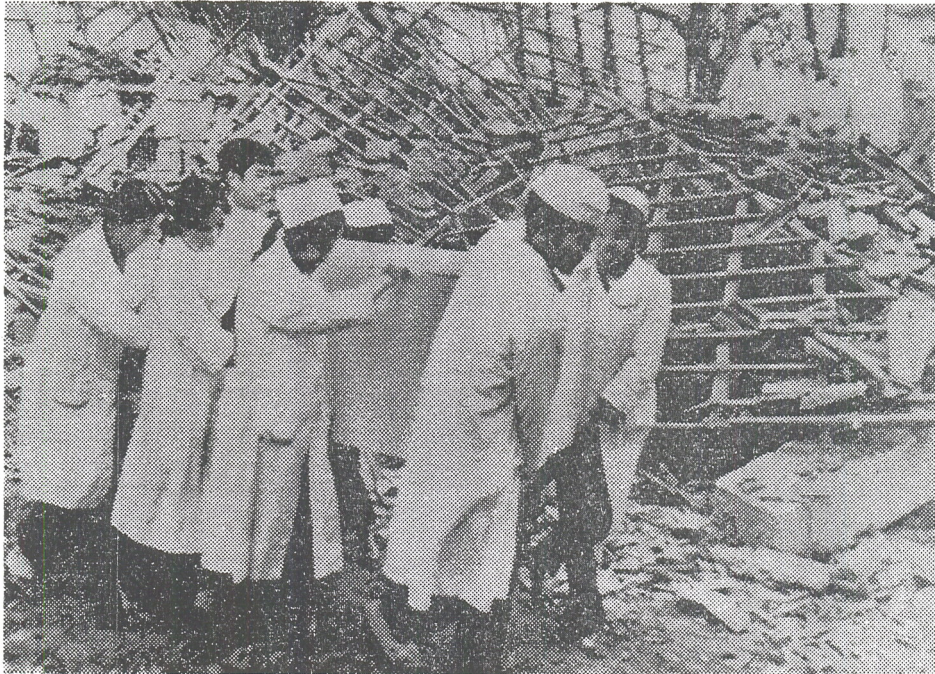
AP Wirephoto

Le Duc Tho after January, 1973 Paris talks

obscene terms.

"I had reluctantly decided that we had now reached the point where only the strongest action would have any effect in convincing Hanoi that negotiating a fair settlement was a better option for them than continuing the war," he says. "Kissinger and I agreed that this meant stepping up the bombing."

Nixon says that on December 14 he gave the order to resume attacks on December 17. The date is interesting: On December 16 Kissinger called a news conference at



Hanoi doctors and nurses in the ruins of bombed hospital

Bomb Hanoi

which he denounced the North Vietnamese but did not indicate that bombs would fall the next day.

During the bombing, which lasted until December 29, no rationale was provided to the public, and Nixon tries to justify the decision in his memoirs.

He says that, even though many people did not understand why he did not explain the bombing, "I was convinced that any public statements on my part would have been directly counterproductive to the possibility of resumed negotiations."

"If I had announced that we were resuming bombing for the purpose of forcing the North Vietnamese to negotiate, their national pride and their ideological fanaticism would never have allowed them to accept the international loss of face involved in caving in to such an ultimatum," he says. "So I did it with the minimum amount of rhetoric and publicity, and it succeeded exactly as I had intended."

Nixon also discloses that he had sent "the strongest letter I had yet written" to President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam, saying that unless Thieu approved "this absolutely final offer on my part for us to work together," the two countries would have to go "our separate ways." Saigon was dubious of the American-North

says, sent a message that "they had had enough" and, after agreement was reached in January, he sent another message to Thieu warning that if South Vietnam did not accept, "I will do so, if necessary, alone."

The latest installment of the memoirs reveals nothing that in general has not already become known, but it underscores Nixon's belief that the use of force produced results. He says in the installment that the South Vietnamese were able to remain free until Congress "reneged on our obligations," cutting off the bombing and placing limitations on aid.

"And it is Congress that must bear the responsibility for the tragic results," he says. "Hundreds of thousands of anti-Communist South Vietnamese and Cambodians have been murdered or starved to death by their conquerors, and the bloodbath continues."

Outside experts generally agree that the situation in Cambodia since the fall of Phnom Penh to the Communists in April 1975 has been grim. Thousands have been killed, and, they say, there has been widespread deprivation of human rights. In South Vietnam, captured by North Vietnam in 1975, there has been a vast re-education campaign but no "bloodbath."

Vietnamese plan.

The North Vietnamese, Nixon

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