

On Misunderstanding Vietnam

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Jan. 5—One of the small but important ironies in the tangled relations between United States officials and enemy officials in Vietnam is that there is a persistent misunderstanding between them about the word "understanding."

This goes back to October 1968, when President Johnson agreed to stop the bombing of North Vietnam and officials of North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front agreed to negotiations in Paris with representatives of the South Vietnam Government.

It is important to understand what was done at that time if the last phases of the war are not to be made even more complicated than they are by charges of bad faith on both sides. Ideally, this clarification should be made by President Johnson or his Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, or by Ambassador Averell Harriman or Ambassador Cyrus Vance, who took part in the delicate arrangements at that time; but they are apparently unwilling to spell out the details, so reporters have to do what they can to keep the record straight.

In the first place the Communist officials refused to enter into any formal "understanding," in the sense of an agreement, about what was to be done or not done after the bombing stopped. They took the view that the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam was an illegal breach of international law, and that any effort by the U.S. to insist on "conditions" for stopping the bombing would be a form of blackmail.

Accordingly, another expedient was used. The United States said it would stop the bombing unilaterally. Washington then stated that the United States could not be expected to continue this policy (1) if the enemy violated the demilitarized zone between

WASHINGTON

North and South Vietnam or (2) if the enemy renewed its attacks on the cities of South Vietnam.

The enemy negotiators in Paris were asked whether they "heard" these two points. They said they did. They were asked whether they "understood" what the U.S. was saying. They replied that they did. The United States then informed them that the United States intended to fly unarmed planes over North Vietnam, but the enemy has always insisted that it never agreed to this since to do so would be recognizing the right of the United States to violate the air space of a sovereign state.

This, then, is the factual situation as explained by officials who had firsthand knowledge of the Paris talks of October '68. Thus, each side had its own "understanding" of what took place there, but there was no agreed understanding or formal statement of terms or promises, and each side has proceeded ever since to act on its own understanding or interpretation of the arrangement.

In his news conference of last Dec. 10, and again in his conversation with the television commentators the other day, President Nixon insisted again that "there was an understanding that after the bombing halt, unarmed reconnaissance planes could fly over North Vietnam with impunity," but he added something else which helps clarify the situation.

"Now the other understanding," he said, "is one that I have laid down. It is a new one . . . if the enemy at a time we are trying to de-escalate, at a time we are withdrawing, starts to build up its infiltration, starts moving troops and supplies through Mugia Pass and the other passes, then I as

Commander in Chief will have to order bombing strikes on those key areas. . . ."

In his Dec. 10 press conference, he was even more specific. He said then that if "as a result of my conclusions" the North Vietnamese threatened our remaining forces by their infiltration, "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 I will take."

This is a clear warning. It is a clear statement of policy, justified on the grounds of necessity in order to preserve the security of the withdrawing American expeditionary force, but it is just as clearly not a part of any understanding or agreement between the United States and enemy officials.

The President is insisting on his own freedom of action to bomb when he believes this is necessary to the preservation of his command. It is the insistent reference to the 1968 "agreement" that is causing the confusion. As he now says, he is laying down his own "new" conditions. He is going to continue to fly over North Vietnam to watch for a build-up of enemy troops, which he insists was part of the '68 "understanding," but meanwhile he wants the enemy to understand something "new": that he will destroy anything that attacks his planes, and bomb any concentration of troops that seems threatening.

This is quite understandable, but it is also quite different from the original warning that he might renew the bombing if the enemy moved into the demilitarized zone or started shelling the South Vietnamese cities. He is not waiting for that now. His policy is to bomb before they get to the DMZ or move into place to shell the cities. The military logic of this is obvious, but it is not a part of Hanoi's "understanding" or even of Washington's "understanding" of October 1968.