

The 1968 'Understanding'

By DANIEL I. DAVIDSON

WASHINGTON — When the heavy fighting resumed in South Vietnam several weeks ago, the Administration began harping on the allegation that the North Vietnamese had violated the understanding they had entered into with the United States in October 1968. The clear implication has been that the United States has kept its word while Hanoi has not. The facts are that it was President Nixon who first repudiated and breached the understanding.

The military terms of the understanding which led to the stopping of the bombing of the North Vietnamese have been referred to by officials of the Johnson and Nixon Administrations and are not in dispute on this side of the water. The United States was to stop its bombing and naval bombardment north of the DMZ. Hanoi was to refrain from indiscriminate attacks on the major cities of South Vietnam and from infiltrating or attacking through the DMZ. Hanoi also understood that American reconnaissance flights over its territory would continue.

In May of 1970, shortly after he had sent American troops into Cambodia, President Nixon in four days sent over 500 planes to raid the North. It was officially described as a "protective reaction" necessary for the defense of our reconnaissance flights. Supply dumps were hit. United States credibility was strained since Secretary of Defense Laird had just stated that the understanding had "been fairly well lived up to by Hanoi" and that "our aerial reconnaissance had been interfered with only rarely."

In November, 1970, another series of heavy American attacks on the North was again officially described as "protective reaction." The actual purpose of the raids became apparent when officials indicated there had been an enemy buildup outside South Vietnam and called attention to President Nixon's oft-stated threats to take "strong and effective measures if the enemy took advantage, through increased military action," of his program of gradually withdrawing American troops. Secretary Laird testified that the air attacks were "a signal that we would not tolerate the setting aside of the understanding." Again the claim was made that the United States was carrying out its part of the understanding.

On Dec. 10, 1970 President Nixon referred to "another understanding (in

addition to the one concerning reconnaissance) with regard to the bombing of North Vietnam." The "understanding," which he asserted he was "re-stating," was that if North Vietnamese forces "increased the level of fighting in South Vietnam" as American troops were withdrawn he would retaliate by ordering the bombing of North Vietnam.

The President attempted to conceal his repudiation of the 1968 understanding by verbal sleight of hand. He used the term "understanding" to declare unilaterally that if North Vietnam took certain actions which did not violate the negotiated understanding, he would order bombing. The negotiated understanding had allowed the continuation of the war while the talks continued. Despite certain inhibitions each side was permitted to seek military victory. President Nixon was now stating that if the North Vietnamese threatened his Vietnamization program by raising the then low level of military activity or otherwise refusing to acquiesce in their defeat he would resume the bombing.

This was finally acknowledged by Secretary Rogers on Dec. 23, 1970. He admitted that no understanding had been reached with the North Vietnamese which prohibited them from interfering with the Vietnamization program. "Obviously," said the Secretary of State "it couldn't be part of the understanding. At the time the understanding was reached there wasn't any Vietnamization program."

The President did what he threatened. Bombing reached a peak during five days in December, 1971, when over 1,000 strikes were made against the North. The enemy was warned that continued efforts to achieve a significant buildup of supplies would result in further attacks. However, such a buildup did not violate the negotiated understanding.

There are strong indications that Nixon Administration officials believe the negotiated understanding was a bad deal for the United States. They may or may not be correct. But the crucial point is that after painstaking negotiations, the word of the United States was given. This Administration had no right to dishonor it. Having done so, for it to charge North Vietnam with violating the understanding is the purest hypocrisy.

Daniel I. Davidson was a member of the U.S. delegation to the Paris peace talks which negotiated the 1968 understandings.

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