

The Washington Post

1/13/73

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

No Nuclear Weapons in Vietnam

Q. Mr. President . . . is there any limit . . . to our use of airpower [in Vietnam]?

A. I am not going to place any limitation upon the use of airpower except, of course, to rule out a rather ridiculous suggestion that is made from time to time . . . that our airpower might include the use of tactical nuclear weapons. As you know . . . this has been speculated on for a period of five years, and I have said for a period of five years that this is not an area where the use of nuclear weapons, in any form, is either needed or would be wise.

—President Nixon's news conference,
Feb. 17, 1971.

A more explicit and categorical pledge not to use nuclear weapons on North Vietnam could not, we submit, be either demanded or given. Nor are we aware of one smidgeon of evidence or of one even faintly suspicious hint that Mr. Nixon is now of a mind to review the sensible and honorable pledge he gave in 1971. If there is one contingency in Vietnam which even the most distrustful of Americans should not have to anticipate, it is the use there of nuclear weapons.

We make the point so emphatically because of our own apprehension over the possible mischief that was done the other day in an exchange between Sen. Harold Hughes and William P. Clements Jr., during the latter's confirmation hearing to be No. 2 man at the Pentagon. The senator asked for Mr. Clements' views on nuclear use in Vietnam, and the nominee hedged, leaving his position open and, in the process, leaving open the possibility that he might recommend nuclear bombing in some unspecified circumstances. From the exchange, it was evident—to us, anyway—that neither the anxious

war critic Mr. Hughes nor the cautious new boy Mr. Clements was familiar with the unequivocal policy statement on the issue made by President Nixon just two years ago.

The potential for mischief of their mutual innocence, however, may already be on the way to being realized. News reports of the Hughes-Clements exchange centered on the equivocal nature of Mr. Clements' response. No one familiar with the way such currents run will be surprised to find some critics of Mr. Nixon's war policy wondering, if not claiming, that he has threatened to use nuclear weapons against Hanoi. For some Americans (and foreigners) in their current mood, the leap from the real carpet-bombing of North Vietnamese cities by B-52s to the imagined explosion of nuclear bombs by a President desperate to demonstrate American will is not a very long leap at all. The replays of the news reports by North Vietnam, ever alert for the stuff of useful propaganda, are not hard to predict.

If there is a single benefit to be gleaned from the whole affair, it is the promptness and firmness with which the White House, the Pentagon and the State Department reiterated Mr. Nixon's no-nuclear pledge on Vietnam, just one day after the Hughes-Clements exchange. Naturally, we hope the official response catches up to the exchange which made it necessary. Not only does it put to rest an unfortunate suggestion of nuclear doubt and threat, it sets a fine example of presidential responsiveness to public concern. We hardly need repeat how troubled we and many others have been by Mr. Nixon's gathering second-term tendency to govern as though the people, the Congress, the press were not there.