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Bombing Turnaround

PRESIDENT NIXON'S latest statements and action regarding Vietnam open a new phase of U.S. policy in the long, tortured and appalling history of the Second Indochina War.

In successive steps over many months, Mr. Nixon has reversed key decisions of his predecessor, Lyndon B. Johnson. What Mr. Johnson de-escalated, Mr. Nixon has escalated. The result is a policy startlingly similar to that which Mr. Nixon advocated while a private citizen: on the ground, let Asians do the fighting and dying while the

U.S. does the financing and the advising; in the air and sea, use massive American power to bomb the homeland of the foe without sanctuary or gradualism.

President Johnson started with military advisers and shifted to U.S. ground troops in a steady buildup that reached 540,000 American fighting men in South Vietnam. Mr. Nixon has progressively withdrawn the U.S. ground troops—last week's announcement will bring the authorized level down to 39,000 by Sept. 1.

Equally striking is the change in bombing policy. Mr. Nixon's escalation in the air—like Mr. Johnson's on the ground—was conducted so skillfully and over such a long period in progressive steps that the full sweep has escaped many people.

THE STORY can best be summarized in chronology;

February, 1965—President Johnson begins bombing of North Vietnam, originally justified as "retaliation" against guerrilla raids in South. Bombing becomes continuous and gradually extended in area, targets and tonnage as a pressure on North Vietnam and a bargaining chip in negotiations. North Vietnam refuses to negotiate while being bombed.

March 31, 1968—President Johnson halts bombing above 20th parallel of North Vietnam in bid for peace talks. Hanoi agrees to talk on limited basis.

Oct. 31, 1968—President Johnson halts all bombing of North Vietnam. Hanoi regime agrees to full negotiations. Substantive talks ultimately begin in Paris.

Jan. 20, 1969—President Nixon inaugurated.

January, 1970—U.S. jets bomb anti-aircraft missile sites in North Vietnam in "retaliatory" strike for firing on U.S. reconnaissance plane. "Absolutely no change" in policy seen by White House.

March, 1970—Large-scale bombing raids hit two North Vietnamese provinces. Washington announces "protective reaction" bombing policy to protect reconnaissance planes. No change in policy seen by Secretary of State Rogers.

Dec. 10, 1970—President Nixon says he will order bombing of military sites in North Vietnam if infiltration to South threatens remaining U.S. forces.

January-December, 1971—U.S. jets fly 58 "protective reaction" strikes in North Vietnam; at year-end, Air Force and Navy planes carry out massive five-day "limited duration" raids on North to protect Americans in South. No change in policy seen by Secretary of Defense Laird.

May 8, 1972—President Nixon announces heavy bombing and mining of North Vietnam in reaction to North Vietnamese offensive which "gravely threatens" 60,000 American soldiers remaining in Vietnam.

June 29, 1972—As North Vietnamese offensive wanes, heavy U.S. bombing continues. President Nixon justifies continuing bombing as a bargaining chip with Communists—"you get something from them only when they have something they want to get from you"—and says it is necessary to create "incentive" for North Vietnam to return American prisoners of war.

AND SO by slow stages the United States is back to massive, virtually unrestricted bombing of North Vietnam plus mining of the rivers and Haiphong harbor (which Lyndon Johnson never undertook). And at Thursday's press conference, the bombing was justified on a basis which could continue it indefinitely.

President Johnson stopped the bombing less out of conviction that it would bring peace than in response to the pressure of American public opinion. Mr. Nixon evidently believes his action in withdrawing troops has defused public opposition—and for the moment he appears to be right. But in a nation where so many people believe strongly that the war and the bombing are wrong, continuation of this policy is likely to be dangerous and perhaps impossible in the long run.

Another extraordinary thing about the new developments is the shift in North Vietnam's position. If all goes as planned and announced, Hanoi's leaders are now about to do what they steadfastly refused to do in the 1960s and what they vowed they would never do—to go to the negotiating table with the United States while being heavily and continuously bombed. The fascinating question is why. To this question, there is no clear answer.