

Nixon intends to show cheap peace won't do

WASHINGTON — President Nixon's difficult decision, reached on Friday, to resume mining Haiphong harbor the following day and unleash full-scale bombing of North Vietnam's heartland Monday morning, exactly fits the tough war strategy he has followed at every climactic point since he took office four years ago.

The President, reacting typically to Hanoi's apparent judgment that he was in a domestic political bind and simply had to

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produce a peace agreement, scarcely hesitated. He slipped both Moscow and Peking advance word — but not advance enough to permit interference with his decision — and then sent his bombers and minelayers into action.

The quick result of this typical Nixonian response to what he and Henry Kissinger regard as Hanoi's calculated foot-dragging is the resumption of full-scale aerial warfare for the first time in two months.

Result unpredictable

Although the long-run result is unpredictable, Mr. Nixon hopes that reopening the war in all its fury will purge the Hanoi politburo of misconceptions that the U.S. will permit the war to end on the cheap. The resumed full-scale bombing, which may be even more destructive than last fall's record level of aerial devastation, is intended by Mr. Nixon as the clearest possible signal to Hanoi.

This hard-line Nixonian response naturally follows his earlier hard-line decisions to carry the war into both Cambodia and Laos and to mine Haiphong harbor on the eve of his Moscow visit. Those decisions were taken in full consideration of possible violent political reactions at home and in the capitals of international communism.

Relaxed about domestic upheavals

Now that his domestic political position has been strongly fortified with a record election plurality and no U.S. infantry units or draftees serving in Vietnam, he is relaxed about domestic upheavals. As for Moscow and Peking, Mr. Nixon counts on screams of protest but not much more than that. Having decided to use force to break the enemy's will, his problem is not Moscow

and Peking but whether he now will be trapped in open-ended aerial warfare, further swelling his runaway budget.

When Hanoi made the offer that produced Kissinger's Oct. 26 "peace is at hand" prediction, Mr. Nixon had two options:

The first option: Make a quick, spectacular peace without nailing down every loose end of the policing machinery, counting instead on the mood of world peace to restrain Hanoi's worst impulses in the delicate post-cease-fire period.

The second option: acting more cautiously and insisting on prior agreement from Hanoi on the post-cease-fire arrangements—the precise role, size, mobility and powers of the four-nation policing force.

Thieu's scream of protest

What tipped Mr. Nixon toward taking the second option was the scream of protest from President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam. Thieu's rising popularity as the South Vietnamese patriot willing to battle both Hanoi and Washington suddenly transformed him into a far more dangerous antagonist.

Had Kissinger managed to pin Hanoi down to an equitable cease-fire guarantee, Mr. Nixon was prepared to shove it down Thieu's throat. But Thieu's new stature at home forced Mr. Nixon to confront these delicate guarantees in the agreement itself, not after the cease-fire took effect.

Even so, the Paris negotiations were going so smoothly as of Dec. 10 that Kissinger sent his deputy, Gen. Alexander Haig, to Washington to discuss one major sticking point with the President. Tentative arrangements had already been made to send Haig and a top-level U.S. delegation to Saigon this week with the complete agreement for Thieu's inspection.

Le Duc Tho's suspicious signs

What happened is now history. At the negotiating session on Monday, Dec. 11, Le Duc Tho, Hanoi's chief negotiator, showed suspicious signs of stalling. On Tuesday, he produced a new set of protocols for the post-cease-fire machinery that would have made a mockery of any serious policing of the agreement. On Wednesday, Tho added still other demands.

To Mr. Nixon, this sudden change meant one thing: Hanoi had decided that the American President was tied to a peace-at-any-price pledge and would have to knuckle under.

Whether right or wrong in that judgment, Mr. Nixon reacted characteristically by unleashing his bombers and minelayers. Now it is Hanoi's move.