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Nixon's 'Respect For the Presidency'

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THE BIG TWO have arranged to channel the tide of war in Vietnam around the summit meeting fixed for Moscow next month. In the process the Paris Peace Talks have been reopened.

Normally this would cause joy unconfined. Only the President seems so wound up in his own need to prove himself that I come away from the recent events with a sick feeling.

It was chiefly out of Mr. Nixon's self-doubts that the need to detour Vietnam around the summit arose in the first place. As soon as the enemy offensive opened up at the end of March, the White House was full of dire talk about Communist maneuvers to put Mr. Nixon in a weak position at the Moscow summit.

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MR. NIXON then began a complex huffing and puffing, designed to make the Russians swear off the fell intent imputed to them in his own mind. There were a series of remarks linking the offensive in Vietnam to the Soviet supply of arms.

When these brought only an ambiguous reply from Moscow, Mr. Nixon decided to prove to the Russians that he was serious. He ordered the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong.

Within a couple of days, the Russians proposed that Mr. Nixon send a high-level emissary to talk things over with Party Secretary Leonid Brezhnev. In response to that invitation, we now know, the President's chief foreign policy adviser, Henry Kissinger, flew to Moscow for four days of talks with Brezhnev. In those talks, the artificial confrontation which Mr. Nixon had staged was wound down in a contrived de-confrontation.

Under the terms of the de-confrontation, the United States agrees to resume the peace talks in Paris. The Russians agree to play a mediating role between Hanoi and Washington. Hanoi agrees to send its chief negotiator, Le Duc Tho, back to the Paris talks.

On the surface, everything is hunky-dory. But in me these events generate neither confidence nor cheer.

All Mr. Nixon has accomplished, for one thing, is to redeem past blunders. The assurance that the Moscow summit will take place only relieves doubts unnecessarily inspired by the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong. The resumption of talks in Paris only gets the Vietnam talks back where they were before the administration deliberately broke them off.

Then there is the self-conscious quality of the TV speech delivered by Mr. Nixon last Wednesday which can only inspire misgiving. A President who talks over and over about "respect for the Presidency" does not know how to achieve it.

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WHICH BRINGS US to the critical point — the matter of death and destruction. There are moral principles at stake, and the true source of my uneasiness lies in the feeling that the country is now entering a crunch where these principles are not restraining the national leadership.

The fact is that decency knows no excuse for the President's willingness to bomb cities the better to prove he is tough. Honor offers no support for the view that it is all right to destroy a country to maintain what Mr. Nixon is pleased to call "respect for the Presidency."