

Nixon's Seven Days In May

By GAYLORD SHAW

WASHINGTON (AP) — It began with presidential adviser Henry Kissinger jetting through the night sky to a secret rendezvous in Paris.

It ended a week later with a solemn President telling the nation he had decided to confront Communist superpowers by mining North Vietnamese harbors.

During those seven days in May, Richard Nixon struggled with the most momentous decision of his presidency—a decision that posed the greatest potential for a world power showdown since the Cuban missile crisis a decade ago and threatened for a while to wreck his Moscow summit.

NIXON'S SEVEN days in May carried none of the sinister plotting of Fletcher Knebel's presidential novel with that title, but a series of interviews with White House aides and administration officials since his May 8 announcement discloses the high drama of presidential decision-making.

Although presidential spokesmen insist a final decision was not made until a few hours before the May 8 television address, the interviews indicated

Nixon had settled on his specific course of action as much as six days earlier.

There also are indications that the mining of North Vietnam's harbors had been elevated to a top spot on the list of active options several weeks before the announcement, and that contingency preparations were made by the military in April.

BUT THE interviews disclosed that it was during those seven days from May 2 to May 8 that the agony of decision making squarely faced the President.

From official and unofficial sources, this reconstruction can be made:

During the early morning hours of Tuesday, May 2, foreign-policy adviser Kissinger and a few members of his National Security Council staff flew secretly to Paris where Kissinger met in private that day with North Vietnam's chief negotiator, Le Duc Tho.

Nixon and Kissinger had high hopes for the secret session with Tho. It had been arranged at the urging of Soviet leaders with whom Kissinger had conferred at length during four days of secret talks in Moscow—an indication

to them that fruitful negotiations might be in the offing.

BUT KISSINGER soon found that no progress would be made. As he recounted later:

"We were confronted by the reading to us of the published Communist statement. It had taken us six months to set up the meeting and innumerable exchanges, and when we got there, what we heard could have been clipped from a newspaper and sent to us in the mail."

Nixon, by several accounts, was furious. As Kissinger flew home from Paris Tuesday afternoon, Nixon retired to his hideaway suite in the Executive Office Building, across the street from the White House, where he began pondering what to do.

By dinnertime, Kissinger was back. Nixon, Kissinger and Kissinger's No. 2 man, Maj. Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., drove to the Washington Navy Yard where they boarded the squat, 105-foot presidential yacht, the U.S.S. Sequoia.

At dusk they cruised the Potomac River below Washington, with Kissinger delivering a full report on the latest Paris frustrations. The talk turned to options, with Kissinger—in his usual fashion—outlining the pros and cons of various possible steps.

It was at this point, according to most indications, that the President made his tentative decision to mine the harbors through which most Soviet supplies flowed.

BUT HE ORDERED Kissinger's National Security Council staff to prepare detailed studies on alternatives—and on the impact each choice would have

on U.S.-Soviet relations and the scheduled Moscow summit.

Then, on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, May 3-5, Nixon huddled repeatedly in his Executive Office Building suite with his closest advisers—Kissinger and Secretary of the Treasury John B. Connally.

While Kissinger and his staff traced the probable diplomatic and military repercussions, the tall Texan assayed for Nixon the likely domestic reaction. Connally, who has since disclosed his resignation from the Cabinet, firmly advocated strong steps such as mining.

Nixon began to work on the words he would use to tell the American people of his decision. And, after another round of meetings with Connally and Kissinger on Friday, the President boarded a helicopter for the 20-minute flight to Camp David.

On Friday night and Saturday morning, Nixon retired to nearby Birch Cabin where, sitting in a high-backed, blue easy chair and with his feet propped on an ottoman, he dictated a draft of his speech from notes scrawled on yellow legal pads.

To his exasperation, he learned on Saturday that, because of a dictating machine foul up, one of the three tapes he consumed was mostly blank. With appropriate comments about the machine, he dictated that portion of the draft again from his notes.

AT THIS TIME, only five or six persons in government knew of the President's plan. The list grew by one about noon on Saturday, when a White House aide arrived at the compound to help with the speech.

According to the aide, who would not allow use of his name, the President

was specific about what he wanted:

"A very businesslike, very factual, short, hard-hitting speech cut down to the bare essentials." The aide said he was told to call no one for information or advice.

THE AIDE then set to work embellishing the speech, changing words here and there and adding new phrases. But when the draft came back from Nixon Saturday night, the aide found "where I had done so he reverted back to his chosen words."

The President also eliminated excess material, insisting, the aide said, "on keeping it sparse and tight."

For example, references to the political and personal implications of his decision were scratched because "he didn't want to surround the announcement or the decision with a great atmosphere of crisis."

Also cut were phrases which the aide said Nixon considered divisive, including one that focused on "how political advantage might accrue to a president who chose an immediate pullout."

BUT NIXON scribbled on the margins of the draft some phrases he apparently had decided upon while walking through the woods.

They included his declaration that: "There is only one way to stop the killing and that is to keep the weapons of war out of the hands of the international outlaws of North Vietnam."

Early Sunday, Nixon telephoned Secretary of State William P. Rogers and told him to cut short his series of talks with European leaders and return to Washington for a National Security Council meeting on Monday.

Kissinger and Nixon went over the draft again, with Kissinger providing

some technical points on international law which were woven into paragraphs describing the mining and the promised interdiction of war supplies.

—AP WIREPHOTO.

AFTER A leisurely dinner with his family, Nixon flew back to the White House Sunday night and proceeded Monday to the 9 a.m. meeting of his National Security Council.

There, while such officials as Rogers, Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, Central Intelligence Agency director Richard Helms and Vice President Spiro T. Agnew listened grimly, the President outlined what he planned to do.

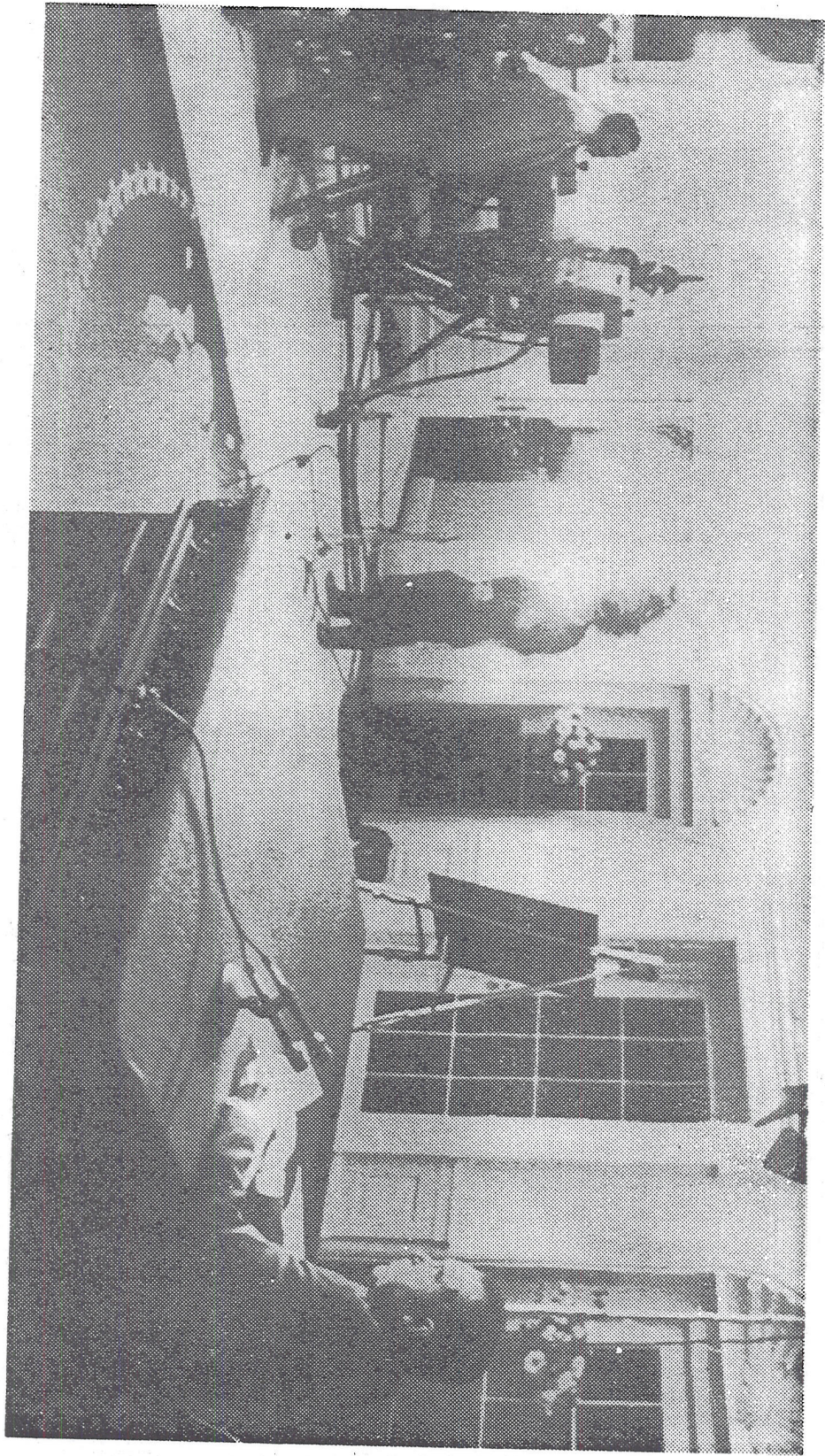
The discussion was described as lively, with Laird reportedly playing the role of devil's advocate, stressing disadvantages of the President's course.

But Nixon was firm. After the meeting broke up, the President headed again to the Executive Office Building.

THERE, HE HELD final, separate sessions with Kissinger and Connally. And from there he sent the final order to aircraft carriers of the Vietnam coast to begin sowing the mines at 9 p.m. EDT.

After working till nearly dark—without dinner—reading the speech over and over again, Nixon stepped back across the street to the White House where he quickly and bluntly told a score of Republican and Democratic congressional leaders what he was ordering. Without awaiting questions from the group, he moved into the Oval Office where television cameras had been installed during the afternoon.

When the red light atop the camera flashed on a few seconds past nine, Nixon began his report to the nation.



1954-1955

1956-1957

1958-1959