

Nixon Even More Secretive Since Peace Talk Breakdown

By Carroll Kilpatrick
Washington Post Staff Writer

The last time President Nixon held a Cabinet meeting was on Nov. 8, the day after his re-election victory, and the last time he held a meeting of the National Security Council was on May 8, the day he ordered the mining of North Vietnamese harbors.

The most recent presidential news conference was Oct. 5. The only recent public statement Mr. Nixon has delivered in person was on Nov. 27 when he spoke about his reorganization plans to reporters at Camp David but did not submit to questions.

Since the cessation of the Paris talks and resumption Dec. 18 of the massive bombing attacks in the Hanoi-Haiphong area, Mr. Nixon has been almost totally isolated not only from the public but from most administration officials.

They are as much in the dark about his thinking, his plans and his expectations regarding Vietnam as the ordinary citizen.

There is no record that in this latter period the President met with any member of Congress except Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott (R-Pa.). There have been no White House staff meetings for the purpose of informing those aides of the President's thinking.

After Henry A. Kissinger returned from the Paris negotiations and reported to the President, Mr. Nixon instructed him also to report to Vice President Agnew, Secretary of State William P. Rogers, Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, CIA Director Richard Helms, and Adm. Thomas H.

Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The President gave his order to resume the bombing at that time, but as far as can be learned he met in person only with Kissinger and Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., deputy national security adviser.

The President last met with Kissinger and Haig on Dec. 22 in Key Biscayne, Fla., the day Haig returned from a quick trip to Southeast Asia. Then Kissinger and Haig went on vacation, but the President and Kissinger kept in close touch by telephone.

What concessions may have been made by Hanoi or Washington are known here only to the President, Kissinger and two or three other officials. The majority of members of the NSC staff are uninformed as to what happened.

Secrecy has become a presidential weapon and only the tip of the iceberg is ever apparent to the voters in this democracy.

In an appreciation which Dean Acheson wrote several years ago of President Truman, the former Secretary of State described how Mr. Truman reached his controversial decision to dismiss Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

On April 6, 1951, the day after publication of MacArthur's famous letter criticizing the conduct of the Korean war, the President conferred with his senior foreign and defense advisers.

Early in the discussion, Mr. Truman agreed that before reaching a decision he should obtain the opinion of the Chiefs of Staff, but since one of them was overseas there was a slight delay in receiving their recommendations.

On April 8, the President told Acheson that he was

prepared to make a decision the following day. On April 9, with his civil and military advisers present, Mr. Truman "asked for our considered advice and listened without interruption" to his advisers, who unanimously recommended that he should remove MacArthur from his command.

"The President's self-discipline in making his decision created a solidly unified administration through what might have been a most critical period and which certainly was a trying one," Acheson wrote.

Mr. Nixon has not gone through that unifying process in his latest decisions on Vietnam. Does he have full backing within the administration? He does not have full backing among Republicans on Capitol Hill.

The kind of consultative spadework which might have been expected could have saved the President the embarrassment of having Republican Sen. William B. Saxbe of Ohio declare that Mr. Nixon "appears to have lost his senses on this . . . I can't go along with him on this."

Saxbe is a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee which, among other things, must pass on the nomination of Elliot L. Richardson to be the next Secretary of Defense. Yet Saxbe said he got no call from the White House about the President's bombing decision "and so far as I know neither did any other member of the committee."

In the latest volume of former British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan's memoirs, he repeatedly describes how major issues were submitted for Cabinet discussion before a decision was reached. Once he was in Trinidad when he received

an urgent request from President Kennedy for a meeting in Key West.

MacMillan says that he immediately got off telegrams to the Cabinet in London and to two Cabinet members who were traveling in the Far East. "I did not wish to accept meeting with President without general approval," MacMillan wrote in his diary. "However . . . everybody seemed in favor of accepting and we telephoned Washington accordingly."

Consultation does not ensure that a decision will be wise, but at least it strengthens the hand of the President or Prime Minister who has to carry it out, and it is in keeping with democratic traditions. Now even Nixon appointees are complaining in private about the isolation and secrecy of the man who promised "an open administration."