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Clearing Sontay Smokescreen

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 29—The wide publicity given the daring but fruitless attempt to free American prisoners in North Vietnam has virtually submerged the questions of whether that raid — and the massive American bombing that coincided with it — violated President Johnson's understanding

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with Hanoi about ending the bombing of the North. Privately, officials in the Nixon Administration marvel at the ability of Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird to divert public attention from that issue and to put senatorial critics of the bombing on the defensive.

"By taking the offense himself," one official suggested, "Laird has pushed the bombing issue and the understanding into the background. He's swamped the opposition. It's amazing how effective he has been with all this news about the Sontay raid."

Similarly, little attention has been paid to the inconsistencies in the Pentagon's version of the Sontay camp raid itself. Initially, Secretary Laird dismissed Hanoi's charges of an American bombing raid in that area as erroneous. Six days later, the Pentagon had to concede that there had been strafing and rocket attacks against military installations in the area around Sontay, as diversion and protection for the American commandos at the Sontay camp.

Official Position Cited

The Nixon Administration's position is that the Sontay raid was a humanitarian act and the attacks by 250 American planes against targets elsewhere in North Vietnam were a legitimate reprisal for Hanoi's downing of an American reconnaissance plane on Nov. 12, in violation of the 1968 understanding.

But in private some officials, as well as former members of the Johnson Administration close to the Vietnam negotiations, contend that the American raids themselves violated

Question Is Raised About Breaking of '68 Accord

the terms of the understanding, just as surely as did Communist rocketing of Saigon in February, 1969, and subsequently.

The understanding of Oct. 31, 1968, has always been shrouded in mystery and controversy. In public, the North Vietnamese have denied that any understanding exists, though in private conversation with this correspondent and others, they have indirectly acknowledged its existence.

Moreover, in the 24 months since President Johnson halted the bombing campaign against North Vietnam, both sides have generally abided by the terms of the understanding — the North Vietnamese refraining from major attacks across the demilitarized zone into South Vietnam, or heavy, continuous shelling of South Vietnam's main cities, and the Americans refraining from sustained bombing of the north.

Point of Contention

One point of controversy from the outset, however, concerned American reconnaissance missions over North Vietnam. Washington contends that the understanding permits them. Hanoi says no.

Johnson Administration officials close to the Vietnam negotiations report that on four or five occasions American negotiators explained to North Vietnamese diplomats in Paris during October, 1968, that reconnaissance flights would have to continue after the bombing stopped. The United States, it was said, felt them necessary to check against enemy build-ups for an attack against South Vietnam.

When the North Vietnamese demanded an end to American bombing and "all other acts of war," the Americans pressed for a change in language. The United States, they said, would agree to stop "bombardments and all other acts involving the

use of force." The Americans told the North Vietnamese this would permit continued reconnaissance missions, presumably since they do not involve the use of force.

When Hanoi's negotiators accepted this new language and raised no objections to the American explanations, Washington interpreted this as agreement.

Many complications have arisen since then. In its eagerness for agreement with Hanoi, the Johnson Administration did not specify how reconnaissance missions would be carried out. Subsequently, the Nixon Administration, somewhat critical of the terms its predecessor accepted, has supplied its own elastic interpretations.

Secretary Laird has long proclaimed the right of "suppressive fire"—that is, the right to retaliate against antiaircraft batteries and missile sites that shoot at American reconnaissance planes. American fighter pilots confide that they often open fire against such installations as soon as they detect North Vietnamese radar focused on them, before the North Vietnamese themselves start firing.

If these represent shadings, the Nixon Administration has been given to broader revisions as well: Last May and again on Nov. 21, the Nixon Administration cited North Vietnamese firing at American reconnaissance missions as justification for heavy bombing raids against North Vietnamese supply depots, ammunition dumps, truck concentrations, petroleum storage facilities, warehouses, and possibly even barracks, as well as missile sites.

Secretary Laird terms these "protective reaction" raids, but other responsible officials say the primary targets are North Vietnamese supply build-ups close to the mountain trails leading toward South Vietnam.

In May, high Administration officials conceded that four days of American air raids were intended to warn Hanoi not to mount a major attack against South Vietnam while large American forces were tied down in Cambodia.

New Concept Added

The Nov. 21 raids, high officials suggest, were aimed at disrupting what were reported to be Hanoi's plans for new offensives in South Vietnam. Mr. Laird added an entirely new concept when he said that some attacks were also directed against North Vietnamese missile sites which had been firing across the border against American pilots operating in Laos.

In the Administration as well as outside, there are those who believe that the May and November raids violated the 1968 understanding. They reason that the Paris talks, once expected to inhibit such violations, have been so sterile that they provide no restraint now. Nonetheless, senior Administration officials do not believe Hanoi will retaliate in great force for the latest American actions.

The concern in some Congressional quarters is that the Nixon Administration is deliberately stretching the understanding to the limit. The theory is that in months to come, President Nixon may want to cite precedents for using massive bombing raids against the North as a deterrent to prevent enemy offensives while American troops are in the final stages of withdrawal.