

Nixon Aides Believe Hanoi Got Best of Deal on Raids

By MAX FRANKEL DEC 12 1970
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WASHINGTON, Dec. 11—Behind the Nixon Administration's expanding threats to resume the bombing of North Vietnam lies a growing conviction within the Government that Hanoi got very much the better of the deal it struck with President Lyndon B. Johnson two years ago.

President Nixon has not yet renounced the deal. But his warning last night of more bombing and the almost daily comments of Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird suggest a determined effort, bit by bit, to redefine the bargain so as to impose new conditions on Hanoi for its preservation.

High Administration officials, who decline to be quoted directly, have recently acknowledged the conclusion that the 1968 Paris "understanding" on bombings, even if justified at the time, has come to be regarded as disadvantageous to the American military effort in Vietnam.

This conforms to the predictions of other officials, who have been saying for some time that President Nixon's plan for troop withdrawals from Vietnam was bound to lead to the conclusion that American air power must be used to compensate for diminishing ground strength.

Protecting Only U.S. Weapon

Now that North Vietnam appears to be increasing the infiltration of men and supplies, to compensate for losses in Cambodia, and to be resisting a prisoner exchange or any other negotiation on the terms offered by the United States, Mr. Nixon is said to be giving notice that he will not let past agreements stand in the way of his using the only weapon left to him as Americans disengage from ground combat—air power on a wider scale.

The bargain of 1968, reached

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in the closing days of the Presidential campaign, was loosely drawn and periodically violated in minor ways by both sides. But until this year both Washington and Hanoi appeared eager to preserve it—although Hanoi denied that such an agreement exists.

In exchange for an "unconditional" halt in the bombing of North Vietnam, Hanoi accepted the "understanding" that it would respect the sanctity of the demilitarized zone that forms its border with South Vietnam, refrain from shelling civilian population centers in the South and admit the Saigon Government to "productive" peace talks in Paris.

The first outward sign of Washington's dissatisfaction with the deal came last May, during the strike into Cambodia, when retaliation for the loss of a reconnaissance plane over North Vietnam was used as the pretext for a massive bombing strike against supply depots and other military targets over a large area of the country.

Attack on Harriman

The next clue to President Nixon's evolving attitude was largely overlooked because it appeared to be merely a political attack in June by Vice President Agnew on W. Averell Harriman, the chief negotiator of the understanding and a vocal critic of the Republicans' handling of the war.

In remarks that must have reflected the tone, if not the language, of high-level discussions around the White House, Mr. Agnew accused Mr. Harriman of "booting away our greatest military trump, the bombing of North Vietnam, for a mess of porridge."

Three weeks ago, Mr. Nixon began to demonstrate both the military and diplomatic ramifications of his evolving policy assessment.

This year's second large bombing raid against supply depots and trails in southern North Vietnam was openly presented as something more than retaliation, or "protective reaction," for the loss of another reconnaissance plane. Simultaneously, with the raid in search of prisoners at Sontay, only 23 miles from Hanoi, Mr. Nixon demonstrated a capacity to elude all air defenses and a willingness, despite the "understanding," to strike close to the enemy's capital.

Retaliation Messages

Then came Mr. Laird's announcement that air defense installations, plus "related" supply concentrations, would be bombed also in retaliation for their harassment of American bombers over Laos — and a strike of that kind to reinforce the message.

Yesterday Mr. Nixon warned that he would retaliate not only for interference with reconnaissance over North Vietnam but also for an increase—of undefined scope—in enemy activity in South Vietnam. And today, Mr. Laird went so far as to suggest that survival of the understanding would also depend upon Hanoi's readiness to make the Paris talks productive.

In several respects, therefore, the Nixon Administration's policies of engagement are turning full circle to the earlier years of the war.

By declaring himself increasingly free to bomb North Vietnam, especially below the 19th Parallel, Mr. Nixon is moving toward Mr. Johnson's position between March and November, 1968, when raids were run up to the 20th Parallel.

By trying to stretch the "un-

derstanding" to include not only the fact of meetings in Paris but also concessions by Hanoi so that they can be "productive," the Administration is moving toward the belief prevailing in the Johnson years that the damage inflicted by bombing North Vietnam may yield returns at the bargaining table. Administration officials at the highest levels have widely advertised the charge that Hanoi blocked effective negotiation throughout the two years of the bombing restraint.

Return to Policy of '65

And by preparing the ground for the use of widespread bombing in place of combat troops, Mr. Nixon is moving toward the Johnson policy at the very start of the big American build-up in 1965 when it was hoped that the use of air power could avoid a massive injection of combat troops.

The revival of interest here in these approaches appears to rest on two calculations: first, that North Vietnam has been sufficiently hurt at home and frustrated in the South to make it susceptible to pressures that failed in the earlier stages of the war; and second, that the political imperative to reduce American casualties and keep on withdrawing troops from the war zones leaves air power—combined with vast military aid—as the only effective way of helping allied forces throughout Indochina.

Logical Consequence

Some former officials with an intimate knowledge of administrative doctrine—such as Morton H. Halperin, who served for a year on the White House staff of Henry A. Kissinger—have long contended that a resumption of bombing would be a logical consequence of the "Vietnamization" or "de-Americanization" of the ground fighting.

In threatening a resumption last night, though expressing the hope that it would not prove necessary, Mr. Nixon in effect left Hanoi with only two other alternatives—a change of terms in Paris or a demonstration, in Vietnam, that it is willing to let American troops depart without again mounting a major military challenge in Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia.

Either way, it was a reassertion of the offers of former Secretary of State Dean Rusk that North Vietnam could avoid punishment from the air whenever it agreed to "leave its neighbors alone."