

NESDAY, DECEMBER 16, 1970

Letter

Vietnam 'Understanding'

To the Editor:

In his press conference on Dec. 10 the President gave a curious interpretation of his "understanding" with respect to reconnaissance flights over North Vietnam. He stated that, under the "understanding," not only may we bomb missile sites if our planes are fired upon, but we may also bomb military sites, supply lines and military "complexes" (whatever this may include) if we see signs of an enemy build-up. This is not an "understanding"; this is an ultimatum.

An "understanding" implies a degree of mutuality. If, in fact, President Johnson reached an understanding with the North Vietnamese that unarmed reconnaissance flights would not be fired upon if we stopped the bombing of the North, by no conceivable stretch of the imagination could such an understanding have extended to reconnaissance flights whose purpose it could have been to prepare the groundwork for bombings of military complexes or for armed raids, as in the case of the ill-fated Sontay rescue attempt. If we overstep the limits of a reasonable interpretation of the understanding, we cannot complain if the North Vietnamese take appropriate protective action. The shooting down of reconnaissance planes engaged on such missions would not justify retaliatory action on our part.

Our credibility in Vietnam is not enhanced by attempting to cover up our own aggressive actions in the North — as in the case of the bombings which took place at the time of the Sontay raid — by charging the North Vietnamese with violations of a nonexistent agreement. [Editorial Dec. 13.]

JOHN FRENCH
New York, Dec. 11, 1970