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Vietnamization's Bitter Fruit

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, Dec. 16—Whatever else it may be doing with its recent flurry of statements designed to justify a substantial resumption of the bombing of North Vietnam, the Administration is flirting with the same tactics that opened President Johnson's fatal credibility gap—the half-truth, the untruth and anything but the truth.

At Defense Secretary Laird's news conference this week, for instance, he read a background statement of Oct. 31, 1968, from an unnamed Pentagon official who was, in fact, Clark Clifford, then the Secretary: "If the good faith which was attached to Hanoi's effort to get substantive talks disintegrates or disappears, and if it is ascertained that they are not proceeding in good faith in their negotiations and that efforts are being made to violate the good faith understandings with movements of one kind or another, then the decision could be made" to resume bombing.

Mr. Laird used this statement, without any further quotation, to bolster his contention that "there has been no basic change in policy," despite recent Administration statements. Those statements include, notably, Mr. Nixon's news-conference warning that he would retaliate with bombing for unspecified increases in North Vietnamese military activity that might threaten American troops, and Mr. Laird's argument that renewed bombing would be justified unless Hanoi made the Paris negotiations more productive.

Mr. Clifford and other officials of the Johnson and Nixon Administrations have stated many times that the

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"understanding" of late 1968 was that the United States would halt the bombing of the North if the Paris talks were expanded to include Saigon and the N.L.F., if the North Vietnamese refrained from major troop infiltrations across the demilitarized zone, and if they and their Vietcong allies stopped shelling and rocketing South Vietnamese cities. The Nixon Administration never stated any other view of the "understanding" until recent weeks, although it was also asserted that an American right to fly reconnaissance missions over North Vietnam was included.

After Mr. Laird's claim of "no basic change," Mr. Clifford stated flatly that he had understood that "the talks were to be conducted so long as the other side proceeded in good faith. And the test of their good faith was that they would not violate the DMZ and would not shell the cities." If that is so, and Mr. Clifford was one of those most involved in the "understanding," then Mr. Laird's advance justification for renewed bombing (lack of progress in the talks) is not just a change but a major change of policy. It also represents at least a partial return to the vain notion that Hanoi can be threatened or bombed into concessions that it has never, under the heaviest blows, been willing to make.

Mr. Nixon's stated "understanding" that certain North Vietnamese military movements, supply concentrations, etc., would justify his bombing the North is an ever more remarkable change

of policy.

In effect, that is a restatement of the almost forgotten "San Antonio formula," under which Mr. Johnson held out a standing offer to stop the bombing in return for "productive discussion" and said he would "assume" that North Vietnam would not take military advantage of such a bombing cessation. Hanoi never agreed to that formula, and the "understanding" of 1968, according to every authoritative version of it, specifically excluded any such "assumption" except for those concerning the cities, the DMZ and—in the American view—reconnaissance planes.

The question is not, therefore, whether the Administration has stated a new policy—it has; nor whether it is preparing a public position for the moment when it may decide to resume the bombings—that obviously is what it is doing. The question is why, since however obstreperous it may be otherwise, Hanoi has not seriously violated the 1968 "understanding" except perhaps in the matter of reconnaissance planes.

But American troop withdrawals have not pushed Hanoi to make negotiating concessions, either, as it was claimed they would; instead, after two years of it, Mr. Nixon is approaching exposure to the inherent weakness of his Vietnamization policy—the possibility that American troop strength may be reduced enough to invite devastating attack that could be prevented or defeated only by air power.

If the pursuit of Vietnamization comes to that, renewed bombing would be the bitter fruit of Richard Nixon's own policy decisions. Not truth, half-truth or untruth could justify it by the "understanding" of 1968.