

A CHANGE BY NIXON IN BOMBING POLICY DENIED BY ROGERS

He Says President Acted to
Keep U.S. Options Open in
His Warning to Hanoi

DEC 24 1970

Excerpts from Rogers news
conference. Page

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Dec. 23—Secretary of State William P. Rogers acknowledged today that President Nixon had gone beyond the terms of the 1968 understanding ending American bombing of North Vietnam when he threatened recently to resume bombing if the enemy stepped up the level of fighting in South Vietnam.

But Mr. Rogers asserted at a news conference that this did not constitute a new policy for the Nixon Administration. He asserted that the President was not threatening to renew "regular bombings the way they were conducted before" but only trying "to maintain our options" as American troops withdraw.

Vietnam figured most prominently in Mr. Rogers' 50-minute news conference. He accused Hanoi of a "contemptible maneuver" in releasing prisoner lists—without any new names—in the Christmas season as an attempt to divert attention from its refusal to open prisoner camps to international inspection. [The North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry defended the treatment of the prisoners as humane and said their plight was a result of American "atrocities" in Vietnam.]

Other Points Discussed

Mr. Rogers also made the following points:

¶Troubles with the Soviet Union over the Middle East, Berlin and Cuba, as well as relatively slow movement in the strategic-arms talks, demonstrate that there are rough spots

in American-Soviet relations, but the Nixon Administration intends to continue to negotiate realistically.

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¶The Government is reviewing its policy toward the Communist China admission to the United Nations now that a majority of members have voted in its favor. He reasserted American opposition to expelling Nationalist China but sidestepped a question whether Washington still regarded the Nationalist regime as "the government of all China."

In his comments on the bombing issue, Mr. Rogers took issue with the press interpretation of comments by the Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird. Mr. Rogers asserted that the Administration was not suggesting that lack of progress at

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the Paris peace talks could be another justification for renewing the bombing. "That's not the premise on which we're operating," he said.

Nonetheless, a senior Johnson Administration official who declined to be quoted by name asserted that the Nixon Administration was unilaterally changing the terms of the 1968 understanding.

In addition, former Secretary of Defense Clark M. Clifford expanded an earlier allegation that Mr. Nixon's warnings, issued at a news conference Dec. 10, constituted a radical departure from the understanding. He termed Mr. Nixon's statements a distressing change of policy.

Senatorial critics of the Administration have accused the President of trying to lay the groundwork for a renewed bombing campaign as ground strength is reduced.

Expanding on remarks in a television appearance on Dec. 11, Mr. Clifford said in an interview today that President Nixon had departed radically from the understanding by adding "two new elements"—the threat to resume bombing if the level of combat in the South increased and the threat to knock out North Vietnamese missile sites and the military complexes around them if American reconnaissance planes are fired on from them.

Under a new news-conference format, in which Mr. Rogers encouraged members of the press to group their questions by subject, they came back several times to interrogate him about Mr. Nixon's warning on bombing.

Mr. Rogers sought to treat that as a separate issue from

the 1968 understanding that brought an end to the Johnson Administration's bombing campaign against the North. That understanding, he said, required Hanoi to refrain from shelling major South Vietnamese cities and from violating the demilitarized zone and permitted continued American reconnaissance flights over the North. Referring to the President, he explained:

"Now, he didn't say that was any part of the understanding. Obviously, it couldn't be part

of the understanding. At the time the understanding was reached, there wasn't any Vietnamization program. Americans were not being withdrawn from South Vietnam. So it's quite a different situation."

Secretary Rogers contended that there had been no change in the Nixon policy since troop withdrawals were ordered in mid-1969. He cited several general warnings by Mr. Nixon late in 1969 and this year that he would take appropriate action if enemy moves jeopardized the safety of the American forces.

The more explicit language used by the President Dec. 10, Mr. Rogers added, was to insure that there be "no misunderstanding that we were under any restrictions or inhibitions in the process of our troop replacement."

"I'm sure the other side got the message," he said.