

President Appears to Hint At Raids to Free P.O.W.'s

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 9—Using his strongest terms on the subject to date, President Nixon pledged today to retrieve the American prisoners of war held by North Vietnam "either as part of an over-all settlement, or through other means."

Although Administration officials declined to elaborate, the reference to "other means" appeared to be a veiled warning to North Vietnam that the United States might try again to free the men by taking military action, as it did in the unsuccessful Sontay prison raid of Nov. 21, 1970.

In the wake of that dramatic rescue attempt, in which American commandos descended on a prison camp that proved to be empty, the Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, warned that the United States would use any means—including another raid—to free the prisoners.

Mr. Nixon returned to this theme today in the Vietnam section of his foreign policy report to Congress. Noting that North Vietnam has been consistently unyielding on the prisoner issue, he pledged to pursue "every honorable path" to free the men.

A Warning on Saigon

Elsewhere in his report, Mr. Nixon stressed the flexibility of his eight-point peace proposal, but warned Hanoi that negotiations could not succeed as long as North Vietnam continued to insist that the United States overturn the South Vietnamese Government.

"If instead they are willing to compete fairly in the political arena in South Vietnam," the President said, "they will find our side forthcoming to meet their concerns."

Mr. Nixon went over the history of the 30 months of secret negotiations that he made public on Jan. 25, and said the differences between the two sides in Paris had come down to one fundamental issue:

"Will we collude with our enemies to overthrow our friends? Will we impose a future on the Vietnamese people that the other side has been unable to gain militarily or politically?"

"This we shall never do."

Sees Foe Planning Drive

As Administration officials have done, the President also predicted that the enemy would attempt to mount a significant offensive in coming weeks.

"Our friends are bound to suffer some isolated setbacks," Mr. Nixon said. "But these should not distort the over-all picture of growing self-sufficiency and security in South Vietnam."

On other facets of Indochina policy the President conceded that the United States had been "disappointed" by the unopposed presidential election in South Vietnam last October.

Nonetheless, he said, he chose to accept the disappointment rather than indulge in "the probably fatal mistake of attempted manipulation of the South Vietnamese political scene"—an apparent reference to the acknowledged American complicity in the overthrow in 1963 of President Ngo Dinh Diem.

The President also contended that important progress had been made during 1971 in the pacification program. "Over 80 per cent of the total population of South Vietnam is under effective Government control," Mr. Nixon said.

At a news conference at the White House just before the President presented his report, Henry A. Kissinger, Mr. Nixon's national security adviser, insisted that President Nguyen Van Thieu endorsed fully the new American peace proposals presented in Paris last week.

News reports from Saigon have indicated that Mr. Thieu was distressed over what he considered to be American attempts to expand on his offer to resign a month in advance of a new presidential election, in which all political factions would take part.

Mr. Kissinger hinted that Mr. Thieu's statements were designed for local consumption when he said: "Whatever the tactics of what should be said publicly at a particular time, they do not reflect any disagreement as to where we stand today."

Mr. Thieu, Mr. Kissinger said, has been in "full agreement with every proposition" advanced by the allied side in Paris.