

# Two Can Play The Game

By Tom Wicker

The United States pulled 300 troops out of South Vietnam last week, lowering its strength there to 24,900, the smallest total since February 1965. Those with long memories and ironic minds will recall that February 1965 was the month when President Johnson began the bombing of North Vietnam in an effort to force the Hanoi Government to agree to American terms in the lethal dispute over the future of Indochina.

Since then the nation has gone full cycle through an effort that at its zenith took more than half a million troops into Vietnam for the longest war in American history; but those ubiquitous "well-placed American officials" who never have a name or a title are saying nevertheless that President Nixon once again is pondering ways and means "to put pressure on North Vietnam to reach an early cease-fire agreement."

Have "well-placed American officials," whether their names are Nixon or Smith or Kissinger or Jones, learned nothing from seven years of failing war?

Can they conceivably believe that they can "pressure" North Vietnam into doing what Mr. Nixon wants it to do, when not this country or South Vietnam or Australia or New Zealand or South Korea, or the combination of them all, has been able in seven years to defeat on the battlefield the forces that Hanoi supports?

Is it possible, after 50,000 American deaths and so much slaughter in Indochina that no humane man can think of it without flinching, that these officials still believe that anything short of total devastation or nuclear annihilation is going to force the North Vietnamese to accept terms they consider inimical to their interests and goals?

If Mr. Nixon will not be "blackmailed" or "stampeded" or "charmed" into an agreement he does not believe "just and fair," what makes him think that his opposite numbers in Hanoi will be any less resolute?

But these are merely rhetorical questions, however justified by disgust and outrage. The fact is that the United States has resumed bombing throughout North Vietnam, as well as

the aerial mining of the country's harbors. This is an obvious effort to "pressure" the North Vietnamese, in the wake of the breakdown of negotiations in Paris, despite Ronald Ziegler's efforts to describe it as a sort of "protective reaction" against the possibility of a new North Vietnamese offensive.

This is an effort that will fail, as all other efforts to "pressure" the North Vietnamese have failed. The truth is that these people—at least their unchallenged leaders—are guided by a cause and sustained by zeal; and their Government and society is not so constituted as to be much affected by the kind of bombing that could not even "pressure" industrialized Germany in the nineteen-forties.

Close examination of the full text of Dr. Kissinger's news conference, as printed in The Washington Post, discloses that at every opportunity he ducked an answer to the crucial question (repeated in various forms): "You say it is the U.S. insistence that the two parts of Vietnam should live in peace with each other. Is that not the fundamental disagreement here?"

Of course it is; the insistence that there are "two Vietnams" has been fundamental to American policy in Indochina ever since the influence of John Foster Dulles led us, tragically, to violate the Geneva agreement of 1954. The insistence that there is only one Vietnam has been fundamental to North Vietnamese policy since the same period. It was easily predictable that if Washington insisted on an agreement that recognized "two Vietnams," Hanoi would not accept it; and it surprised many—perhaps including Mr. Nixon—that Dr. Kissinger, on Oct. 26, appeared to be agreeing to a "cease-fire in place" that at rock bottom conceded there was only one Vietnam.

So when he went back to Paris and reopened that particular point—either by demanding re-establishment of the demilitarized zone, or by asking for a declaration of Saigon's exclusive sovereignty in South Vietnam—Dr. Kissinger should not have been surprised that the North Vietnamese then reopened other parts of the draft agreement, in their own favor. Whether the American revisions were sought in deference to President Thieu, or because Mr. Nixon in the meantime had won a landslide election at home, or out of inexplicable naiveté, or for all these reasons, they reflected the fundamental and apparently undying conviction in Washington that at some point Hanoi can be "blackmailed" or "stampeded" or maybe even "charmed" into submission.

What has been demonstrated since Oct. 26 is that the North Vietnamese were and are willing to sign essentially the agreement Dr. Kissinger had in hand on that date, and that whether to sign it is the fundamental decision President Nixon has to make. If he wants to make it more favorable to his own political goals, Hanoi has shown him that at the conference table, as on the battlefield, two can play the game.