

Two Views on the President's Decision

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[also Evans and Novak, clipped]

WHAT WAS the dramatic decision in Hanoi which, according to Henry Kissinger, resulted overnight in a complete reversal of the Communist attitude at the Paris talks? "I really have no clue," he says. All he knows is that when he first got back to Paris the Communists were as cooperative as before, and that three days later they suddenly turned nasty. "We don't know," he says, "what decisions were made in Hanoi at that point."

Even if he does not know, his analysts should have told him by now. The original Hanoi decision to make a whole series of concessions to the United States was reached, as was amply documented in this column, after a fight in which the hardliners in the North Vietnamese leadership were narrowly defeated by Communist "doves." It took the Hanoi Politburo three days to digest the reports from Paris, and to take a new vote on the new American demands, which went far beyond what had been previously agreed. In these circumstances, the Hanoi hardliners would have been able to argue that they had been right all along, and to swing the politburo majority to their side.

The Hanoi vote would have been influenced, perhaps decisively, by the Communists own analysis of what had gone wrong in Washington. Had they been tricked by Kissinger? Or, they would ask, had Kissinger as well as they been tricked by Mr. Nixon?

The question must loom even larger in their minds now that the bombing and mining has been resumed, and that they have to make their own decision whether to resume the offensive.

Hanoi's own demonologists will have taken note of the Washington rumors of trouble between Mr. Nixon and Kissinger, but they would hardly base policy decisions on rumors. They would look for evidence, and they would find it in Kissinger's angry retort to John

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Osborne of the New Republic. "Look," Kissinger told him, "you've had a theory that I thought has been really extraordinarily mischievous, that there's been some sort of trouble between the President and me, and that I overstepped my instructions. . . . That is totally, 100 per cent wrong."

Osborne, who is properly regarded by Communist Washingtonologists as one of the best Nixon-watchers, was puzzled by a circumstance that would certainly have been regarded as significant by Hanoi's own demonologists. Mr. Nixon and Kissinger were recently lodged for three days within a few minutes' drive of each other, but talked only by telephone — and Mr. Nixon again confined himself to the telephone when he flew later to Washington with the announced purpose of talking with Kissinger, although they were both at the White House then. "It's a fact," Kissinger told Osborne, "but it doesn't mean what you think it means."

Some American political commentators regard this sort of analysis as unreliable, inapplicable in our open society, but this does not make it irrelevant, because we know that it is being practiced by Communist analysts, and that Communist leaders sometimes base their decisions on it. The Nixon administration's predilection for secrecy imposes a cost on the open society. Hanoi, too, must use the only information to which it has access.

So, Hanoi would analyze Kissinger's public statements to see what they add to his secret remarks at the Paris conference table. Kissinger himself has said that "we all recognize the fact

that political leaders speak to many audiences at the same time," and suggested that their remarks should be analyzed with this in mind.

Certainly there are some highly suggestive contrasts between the news conference in which Kissinger announced that "peace is at hand," and his latest press briefing. In the first instance, he was his usual confident self, taking obviously deserved credit for the Paris agreement. He barely mentioned the President in passing — three times in an hour's talking. In the second instance, he talked for about as long, and kept bringing the President into it — fourteen times in all, and not in passing, either. The President "decided," the President "ordered," the President "reiterated," "made clear," "always enunciated." The President "considers" (twice), the President's "proposal" (twice), his "many speeches," his "stated conditions."

Western analysts have derived a great deal of information by subjecting Communist statements to this kind of content analysis. The Communists would certainly try to do the same, and might well conclude that among the audiences Kissinger was addressing the second time was the President himself. Had the President reprimanded Kissinger for overstepping his authority in the negotiations leading to the draft agreement, as had been widely rumored, Hanoi might ask, and was Kissinger now making it clear that he was only a messenger boy — certainly in contrast to the impression he had conveyed previously?

Saigon's latest outburst against Kissinger would further convince Hanoi that he was down, if not out. When

Saigon radio first began hurling insults at Kissinger, Thieu at least tried to say that this was nothing to do with him, but he has now unleashed the Saigon press hacks again. Mr. Nixon's decision to make public the results of the Paris talks, Saigon announced with jubilation, had undoubtedly placed Kissinger "in an embarrassed position." Hanoi would figure that Thieu knew enough of the White House interplay on Vietnam to kick a man like Kissinger only when he was down. Thieu, in Hanoi's view, is "the tail that wags the dog."

Hanoi's analysts, trying to make sense of the demons, would get the message that Kissinger's relatively soft line had been eclipsed by the President's own policy of strength. They would read the Kissinger news conference as the political signal to go with the new bombing and mining raids. The message was that if Hanoi refused to take his, Kissinger's, friendly advice, the big bullets would take over.

Hanoi might wonder whether this was the good guy, bad guy routine. Or was the good guy out? Did they want to be bombed back to the stone age? What about the dikes now?

Mr. Nixon has always sought to impress his unpredictability on his foreign adversaries. He wants them to believe that he is capable of anything. So he marched into Cambodia, unleashed Thieu into Laos, bombed and mined Hanoi and Haiphong on the eve of the Moscow summit. He has established a pattern. His very unpredictability has become predictable.

If Hanoi, or the Kremlin, or Peking, cannot cope with it now, they will take careful note of the pattern. When they see it emerging again in the future, they will have their response ready — and it is they who will have the advantage of unpredictability. It is a poor outlook.