

Nixon Reported Seeking Path Back to Negotiations

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President Nixon has the option of switching his war strategy from the battlefield back to the bargaining table after the holidays, in the wake of bombing of unprecedented intensity in North Vietnam. Many government officials expect the President to make just that decision.

The double shield of secrecy that the President has placed around any official discussion, or even speculation, about his intentions has blacked out most of the normally limited information about his Vietnam strategy. Even many high-ranking officials privately admit bafflement about the President's plans.

From information that can be assembled indirectly,

nevertheless, the President is reported to be anxious to be back on a negotiating track as soon as possible after Congress reconvenes on Jan. 3.

A rising outcry from war critics in Congress if blazing warfare is underway during the pre-inaugural weeks is

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already a certainty. It is said, however, that this type of challenge, similar to opposition Mr. Nixon often has been able to ride out in the past four years, is not the President's dominant concern. Instead, the President is said to be still determined

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to try to produce a negotiated settlement before his second inauguration on Jan. 20.

Many specialists now think that aim is highly improbable, and that it is completely impossible if the President literally means what his press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, said in Key Biscayne yesterday: President Nixon is determined to "achieve a peace that will last."

Virtually no expert on Vietnam believes that an assured "lasting peace" is attainable in any terms that the United States and North Vietnam can now negotiate. The administration's shorter-range objective, instead, is said to be to try to pick up the negotiating track on which presidential adviser Henry A. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho were operating until Dec. 13.

That negotiating track has been battered not only by the great volume of bombs dropped in the past week on Hanoi and Haiphong, but the diplomatic pattern appears also to have been damaged by injury to the credibility of Kissinger.

The Nixon administration is reported to be concerned about widespread published reports of differences between Kissinger and President Nixon about a settling price for U.S. disengagement from the war. On Wednesday, the White House, through spokesman Ziegler, attempted to quash those reports by insisting that Mr. Nixon and Kissinger have "a unity of point of view." The speculation has persisted, nevertheless.

Inside the administration, a prime point of concern is said to be what North Vietnam may conclude from

these reports about a Nixon-Kissinger divergence, rather than what Americans think about them.

In order to restore any effective negotiating, it appears, the administration now must find means to overcome damage to Kissinger's credibility, whether or not the damage was warranted. Kissinger's critics, (who exist inside the White House as well as outside it) do not reflect the President's own continuing full confidence in him, the White House insists privately and publicly.

Convincing North Vietnam of that, nevertheless, may be a difficult task. Kissinger prided himself on what he considered the excellent rapport he established with Le Duc Tho in years of secret diplomacy. Deep scars may have been left on Hanoi's however, by what North Vietnam's spokesman in Paris described on Thursday as the "threats" of bombing repeatedly made on the American side during the Nov. 20 to Dec. 13 negotiations, and above all, by the furious scale of the bombing that erupted last week.

Some specialists believe that the bombing is bound to toughen North Vietnam's terms for a settlement, instead of making Hanoi's leaders more tractable.

North Vietnam, despite the new punishment it has absorbed, has shown a capacity to absorb so much damage that its success in shooting down a considerable number of American six-man, B-52 bombers in the past week may indeed arouse more exhilaration than dismay in Hanoi over the outcome of the raids.

Many American experts do not idly dismiss the defiant North Vietnamese words

reiterated yesterday by Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap: "Hanoi, Haiphong, and a number of cities and enterprises can be destroyed," but "the Nixon administration is harboring the illusory hope of intimidating our people with bombs and shells and forcing them to yields."

The tenacity of the North Vietnamese so widely conceded at the strategy-making levels of the Nixon administration that many officials—who are admittedly guessing—rate it improbable that President Nixon or Kissinger did count on forcing North Vietnam to make major changes in its terms for a cease-fire settlement.

Instead, it is speculated by some, the President may have ordered the B-52 raids as more of a blunt mauling operation, to show North Vietnam that he had the determination to intensify pressure upon it while he simul-

taneously told South Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu more bluntly than ever before which of Saigon's demands Washington would accept, and which it would reject, as the price of a settlement. To this extent, many experts believe, the leaked reports from Saigon on Wednesday that President Nixon had delivered a "double ultimatum" to Saigon and to Hanoi may be essentially valid.

North Vietnam and South Vietnam, however, had demonstrated extraordinary skill in alternately taking positions that sound plausible to western ears but which are known in advance by each Vietnamese party to be unacceptable to the other.

At one point in the Kissinger-Tho talks, for example, Kissinger is said to have received from the North Vietnamese Politburo member a proposal that sounded completely unintelligible to the American side.

When Kissinger showed the baffling offering to the South Vietnamese delega-

tion in Paris, they reportedly found it today understandable in Vietnamese terms.

This illustration suggests how the currently reported new "flexibility" of President Thieu may not necessarily open any automatic path through the current negotiating impasse, as North and South Vietnam interact on each other in purely Vietnamese ways.

President Nixon now has the option to order a Christmas or New Year's suspension of the bombing of the Hanoi-Haiphong region, on terms matching the one-day cease-fire for each holiday proposed by North Vietnam, or any longer term.

The President could convert such a cease-fire offer into a specific invitation to resume, the Kissinger-Tho negotiations. At a minimum, many administration sources believe it most unlikely that President Nixon would maintain the bombing through Christmas Eve and Christmas day, for the sake of American public opinion. Officials normally would have no hesitancy about projecting such a strong probability. But few officials these days talk of any certainties about Vietnam.