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The Limits Of Power

By Anthony Lewis

LONDON, Jan. 7 — In the Washington cliché, 1973 was to be the Year of Europe. President Nixon and Henry Kissinger would repair America's economic and strategic relations with her old allies. As an earnest of that intention, the President would likely make a grand tour of Western Europe himself.

But without the promised peace in Vietnam, that vision fades. The terror bombing of Hanoi has so outraged opinion in much of Europe that the idea of closer relations with the United States has no political attractions for its leaders; hardly any could now welcome a visit by Nixon or even readily assure his safety.

That is an example of the intangible considerations affecting Mr. Nixon's power to bring about the end he wants in Vietnam. There are limits to that power, practical ones; Mr. Nixon is learning them to his frustration as Lyndon Johnson did.

The hope for a settlement must turn ultimately on such questions of power and how the two sides judge them. As Mr. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho renew their talks, it may be useful to try to set out the strengths that Mr. Kissinger takes into the conference room, and the weaknesses.

The military and economic strength of the United States is fundamental in the equation. The ships and planes are there and cannot be made to go away by any military act within Hanoi's power. American economic resources

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are sufficiently attractive to Moscow to have made it put pressure on Hanoi to settle, and the prospect of future U.S. aid is evidently a factor in the minds of the North Vietnamese.

The independent power of the President in the American system should never be underestimated. He is secure in office for four years, unlike a parliamentary leader, and the Constitution makes him Commander in Chief. The Presidency has its mystique, and even Congressmen opposed to particu-

lar exercises of power hesitate to do anything that might damage the office.

This President, moreover, is ready to use this power without any internal constraints of philosophical consistency or humanity. Whether one likes the idea or not, a negotiator has a certain leverage when the other side knows that his principal is a man who just could decide to lay an entire country waste one day in a temper tantrum — and no one say him nay.

Mr. Kissinger knows also that the public's memory for horrors is short. Propaganda works. Men who do not hesitate to lie their way out of bombing hospitals will have no difficulty in claiming credit for any peace terms reached, however distant from the claimed American goals. As the British magazine *New Society* said last week, "If attacks on two of Hanoi's four hospitals, and some 5,000 dead and injured in the air raids, precede signature of the long-hoped-for peace in Indochina, there will no doubt be many who hail President Nixon's statecraft."

Among the weaknesses in Mr. Kissinger's armor must be listed the generally critical foreign view of a continuing American war in Vietnam. World opinion does not usually count for much. But Mr. Kissinger knows that renewed bombing of civilian targets in Hanoi, for instance, would arouse the disapproval of virtually every civilized country. It is easy to pick on a small place like Sweden for diplomatic retaliation, but would the United States want to exclude ambassadors from Italy, Canada or Australia?

Nor can domestic opposition be dismissed quite so easily. The President has a great advantage over Congress. He can always talk about "a sensitive stage in negotiations" and call for unity behind his war policy. But that game may be running out. Congress might not sit still for another round of Mr. Nixon's present weapon, terror bombing.

In the substance of the negotiations, Mr. Kissinger is at a disadvantage because his credibility was so wounded by Mr. Nixon's disavowal of the terms he negotiated. He has been trying to persuade Hanoi for four years that the United States really wants to get out, making a limited military bargain and leaving the politics to be settled later. No one could conceivably believe that after Mr. Nixon's efforts to introduce political terms into the agreed cease-fire.

The undoing of the October peace terms may have had one especially damaging effect — to make the North Vietnamese less willing to release American prisoners. They had agreed to return the prisoners at once, without any assured quid pro quo, in gen-

eral reliance on American good faith. But with that reliance now shown to be ill-advised, Hanoi may well insist on specific American undertakings before releasing the men who are North Vietnam's only real assurance against a Nixon policy of total extermination.

Finally, in the balance of strengths behind the negotiators, one cannot ignore the character of the North Vietnamese. Even those who do not share their views have to recognize that they are a people of extraordinary determination and bravery. Father Daniel Berrigan was undoubtedly right when he said the other day that "Americans are more despairing about the war than the Vietnamese."