

As the talks resume: What has bombing gained?

NEW YORK — Dr. Kissinger is off to Paris again, and if he is genuinely in search of a compromise settlement of the war, rather than a negotiated victory, everyone must wish him well. But what, it is fair to ask, has been gained since he and President Nixon broke off the talks in mid-December and launched the massive carpet-bombing of Hanoi?

Perhaps North Vietnam really will at last, or perhaps Moscow and Peking are

Tom Wicker

so anxious for trade and good relations with the United States that they will push their dependent ally into settlement. On the other hand, perhaps North Vietnamese defiance and anti-aircraft weaponry have finally convinced Washington that aerial attack on North Vietnam cannot win the war in South Vietnam.

If any of that is true, some kind of peace can be speedily had. But nothing in the history of the war makes it likely that Hanoi will submit, either to the B52s or the urgings of its allies. Nor has there been the faintest hint from Washington that its faith in its military might has finally wilted.

The sovereignty issue

Instead, as Dr. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho prepare once again to confront each other, the best available evidence suggests that at least the sovereignty issue still stands between them as a major barrier to peace. If it had been resolved, or if it had not been a primary problem in December, it is unlikely that Pham Dang Lam, the South Vietnamese delegate to the Paris conference, would have said so pointedly at Thursday's meeting that peace could come "only if North Vietnam and South Vietnam respect each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty." Nor would President Thieu be sending a high-level lobbying mission to Washington to support his stand to a wavering Congress.

The central question

If the sovereignty issue remains, then the central question still is what it appeared to be in December — will Nixon agree with Hanoi to sign a settlement Thieu will not accept but instead denounces as one that means the destruction of his country? After maintaining the war for four years, precisely to give the Saigon regime "a chance" to survive, will Nixon take a step now that would almost surely mean its rapid dissolution?

His own cryptic remark to congressional leaders — that he would insist on a "proper kind of settlement" — does not encour-

age hope that he is ready to yield on such a major issue.

In fact, it is hard to see how the Christmas bombing campaign can have done anything but make it harder for the two sides in Paris to agree, either on the October draft or on a revised version of it. Violence does not usually bring people closer; rather it drives them apart and prevents agreement, unless the more violent side wins absolute domination.

The massive bombing

In this instance, if the United States were now to drop the demands for concessions that Kissinger was making in November and December, it would not only be a tacit admission that the massive bombing campaign had failed, and so much death and destruction had been for nothing, it would also create the kind of impression of which Nixon seems most afraid — that his will had failed, that there is some limit to his ability and willingness to use his power.

But if the North Vietnamese were to make the demanded concessions, or any substantial part of them, it would seem obvious to the world that they had been bombed into submission. Psychologically, therefore, it is altogether likely that Le Duc Tho will be less willing than ever to reconstruct the October draft to satisfy Nixon and Thieu.

It may seem superficially that Nixon has been weakened by the greater unrest in Congress, resulting from the Christmas bombings, and North Vietnamese defiance may be strengthened by the belief that Congress is about to force Nixon out of the war. That Congress might actually do so is most unlikely.

Difficult political task

Cutting off funds for military operations in progress is the most difficult political task that Congress could undertake; it has, in fact, never been done and probably won't be now by a Congress in which Republicans and Southern Democrats are still powerful. Every day that passes without bombing and with talks going on in Paris will lessen the emotion of the issue; Ronald Ziegler's repeated warnings against weakening Nixon while negotiations are in progress will affect wavering members; and every congressman and senator will be well aware that to take Nixon's war away from him, however necessary it may be morally, would be a severe political and diplomatic blow to a president with four years still to serve.

Congressional disapproval may, however, deter Nixon from a casual resumption of the bombing of Hanoi. If so, the outlook may well be for a protracted stalemate in Paris and war as usual in Southeast Asia. That is a sad alternative to the Christmas pattern of massive and shameful destruction.