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# Like a Colossus

By Tom Wicker

## IN THE NATION

No wonder Elliot L. Richardson took refuge in discreet silence, when members of Congress, at his Cabinet confirmation hearing, asked substantive questions about his policy views. By now, he knows that policy in this Administration is the absolute preserve of Richard M. Nixon and the janissaries around him in the White House.

What difference does it make whether Elliot Richardson favored the bombing of Hanoi over the Christmas holidays, or whether he would favor the resumption of that bombing if no agreement is forthcoming at the negotiating table in Paris? Richard Nixon will decide that, no matter what his Secretary of Defense or Congress or the country may think. Obviously, Mr. Richardson is willing to accept that situation, or he would not be willing to be Secretary of Defense; but whether he or somebody else is Secretary of Defense will make no difference whatever as to whether Hanoi is bombed or not. Richard Nixon will decide that, as Richard Nixon may choose.

According to Herbert Klein, the Administration's propaganda coordinator, Mr. Nixon has a "very clear mandate to proceed in the way that he has on Vietnam." This suggestion also has been made in numerous official leaks from the White House; and it is further disclosed by anonymous but assiduous sources that because of this "clear" mandate, Mr. Nixon is aggrieved by the unfair criticism of the bombing that he has had to suffer from the likes of the Swedish Prime Minister, the Pope, the American press and the Republican Senator from Ohio.

No one disputes Mr. Nixon's landslide victory, but was it a mandate to bomb Hanoi? Since Dr. Henry Kissinger assured the American people only twelve days before the election that peace was "at hand" and since Mr. Nixon echoed that view that night in Ashland, Ky., since George McGovern did his best between then and election to call the supposed peace agreement a fraud, it could as well be argued that the landslide was a mandate for peace, and on the Oct. 26 terms at that.

But, in fact, by Mr. Nixon's own testimony, there was no agreement for peace on Oct. 26—or if there was, the Administration reneged on it after the election on Nov. 7. That became clear, if it had not been before, after Mr. Nixon's meeting with members of Congress last Friday, when one who was there quoted him as saying that "we should know fairly quickly next week

whether the North Vietnamese, as they claimed, are ready to negotiate the three major issues of the October agreement."

If words mean anything at all—which, at high policy levels, they may not — this has to mean that "three major issues" either had not been agreed to on Oct. 26 or were reopened later, and by the United States, since the North Vietnamese were then and are now ready to sign the Oct. 26 draft. But so far from denying the words attributed to the President, Ronald Ziegler and several Congressmen identified the "three major issues" as being the return of American prisoners, a cease-fire, and agreement to allow the Vietnamese to determine their own political future.

Thus, the American people voted on Nov. 7 under the clear impression that peace was "at hand," and produced by the Nixon Administration; but either Richard Nixon knew that peace was not "at hand" or the election itself caused him to renege on the Oct. 26 draft. To claim a mandate for the terror bombing of Hanoi under such dubious circumstances is to claim a mandate for anything Mr. Nixon wishes; his landslide, he seems to be saying, has placed an imperial crown upon his head.

The worst of it is that there is a certain frightening truth in that. This withdrawn and untouchable man, who holds no news conferences, forbids elected members of Congress to question him, whose hand keeps not just Dr. Kissinger and Secretary Rogers but hired and supposedly responsible public servants like Admiral Kidd from testifying before duly constituted Congressional committees, and who now rejects even the twentieth century custom of delivering personally his State of the Union message—"upon what meat doth this our Caesar feed, that he is grown so great?"

Suppose the unlikely, that Congress should vote to cut off funds for the war; what power could make Mr. Nixon acquiesce, rather than claim that as Commander in Chief he had the authority to proceed on his own? Or suppose the likely, that the Paris talks should fail again; what power could stop him from doing what he once boasted he had the power to do—destroy the vital North Vietnam dikes and dams in a week?

In either case, the answer is "none."

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