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Nixon's self-made trap on the bombing

WASHINGTON—Even after all the bitter criticism of President Nixon's decision to bomb Hanoi during the Christmas holidays there is still a fundamental philosophic difference here over both the bombing and the criticism.

The administration is defending its right to bomb the North Vietnamese back to the negotiating table without consulting the Congress or explaining why the heaviest bombing of the war was used, not for military but for diplomatic purposes.

Just as strongly Mike Mansfield, the majority leader in the Senate, is challenging this right in public, and though he reported to the President privately the strong resentment in Congress against the unexplained bombing, they did not discuss, let alone resolve, the basic problem of consulting on such questions in the future.

Nixon seems confused

Even Nixon seems confused in his own mind about the obligations of the President and of the Congress and the people at a time of difficult decisions.

For example, in a discussion of his philosophy during the presidential campaign on Oct. 21 last year, he said: "A leader must be willing to take unpopular stands when they are necessary. . . and when he does find it necessary to take an unpopular stand, he has an obligation to explain it to the people, solicit their support, and win their approval."

This, of course, is precisely what the Congress expected on the bombing decision and precisely what the people

James Reston

did not get. And the reason for this may be that, on other occasions, Nixon has taken a quite different position and suggested that the leaders of the country have an obligation to support him when he makes a hard decision.

Just five days before the President accepted the obligation to try to explain his hard decisions, he told the families of the POWs that the hardest decision of his Presidency was the May 8 order to bomb Hanoi and mine the North Vietnamese harbors.

Oct. 16 observation

"It is often said," he observed on Oct. 16, "that when a President makes a hard decision, the so-called opinion leaders of this country can be counted upon to stand beside him regardless of party.

"Who are the opinion leaders? Well, they are supposed to be the leaders of the media, the great editors and publishers and television commentators and the rest. They are supposed to be the presidents of our universities, and the professors and the rest, those who have the educational background to understand the importance of great decisions and the necessity to stand by the president of the United States when he makes a terribly difficult, potentially unpopular decision. They are supposed to be some of our top businessmen who also have this kind of background.

"Let me tell you that when that decision was made there was precious little support from any of the so-called

opinion leaders of this country who I have just described."

This comes nearer to the official attitude now: When the President acts, with or without consultation or explanation, he should be supported, regardless of conflicting judgments or even the dictates of conscience, and those who reject this view of Democratic government are somehow regarded as unworthy.

Heart of contention

It is this attitude of mind, this assumption that the President may bomb as he pleases, that the Congress and the people should support him or take responsibility for prolonging the war, that is at the heart of the contention in Washington today.

And it is serious and even dangerous, for the President now apparently feels that he is the innocent party and that he is being trapped between the enemy and a Congress interfering with the peace negotiations in Paris. And the part of it is that Nixon still feels that he did not provoke the Congress, and evidently sees no contradiction between his practices and his proclaimed principles.

"Above all," he said in his philosophic talk last Oct. 21, "this is the land where an alien paternalism has no place at all—because we deeply believe in a system that derives its power from the consent of the governed.

"All of my life I have had faith in the ultimate wisdom of the people, and in the values of fairness and respect and compassion that spring from within the American spirit. As President, I shall never break that faith."

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* FILED POWS