

U.S. Fleet May Return to Tonkin

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WASHINGTON — Despite caution in the State Department, President Nixon is now preparing secret orders for a return to North Vietnamese waters of the full Seventh Fleet complement of aircraft carriers as a hard warning to Hanoi to stop infiltration of the south.

That is the most dramatic step now under top-level consideration here to impress on Hanoi the gravity with which President Nixon views continuing movement of troops and arms from

North Vietnam in direct violation of the Jan. 27 peace agreement.

Some experts in the State Department worry that U.S. threats of new bombing attacks on North Vietnam before all American prisoners of war have been released risk reprisal from Hanoi. The reprisal: Holding up the release of the last batch of POWs (all of whom must be freed, under terms of the Jan. 27 agreement, by March 29). The U.S. military disagrees with the State Department, believing that bombing retaliation before all the POWs are released would be effective in demon-

strating to Hanoi the President's determination.

Returning a full complement of carriers to the Gulf of Tonkin would be the President's unmistakable warning that, if infiltration does not stop, bombing of North Vietnam will almost certainly resume — and, as now being pressed by Pentagon strategists, resumed with far more ferocity than even last December's B52 raids.

In January, the U.S. had four carriers on regular duty in waters off North Vietnam. Today, there is only one with aircraft flying occasional reconnaissance missions.

A second carrier is helping clear Haiphong harbor of American mines. The third and fourth carriers are in Japan and the Philippines respectively, days away from possible action over North Vietnam.