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THE PRESIDENT'S NEWS CONFERENCE OF DECEMBER 10, 1970¹ (EXCERPTS)

Q. Mr. President, a question about Vietnam. Our recent air strikes have raised speculation that our policy of not bombing North Vietnam may be undergoing a subtle change.

What is our policy? Also, despite the rejection by the Saigon Government and the Vietcong, do you plan to propose a unilateral cease-fire from Christmas through Tet in a bid for peace?

... With regard to the second part of your question, the bombing of North Vietnam, you may recall that a few weeks ago there was bombing of installations in North Vietnam after the North Vietnamese had fired on some of our unarmed reconnaissance planes.

Now, there's been, I note, some speculation in the press and also some charges from North Vietnam, that there is no understanding that reconnaissance planes are to fly over North Vietnam since the bombing halt was announced.

¹ Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, Dec. 14, 1970, pp. 1650-1656.

I want to be very sure that that understanding is clear. First, President Johnson said there was such an understanding at the time of the bombing halt. Secretary Clifford did, and Ambassador Vance did.

But if there is any misunderstanding, I want to indicate the understanding of this President with regard to the flying of reconnaissance planes over North Vietnam: I must insist that there be continued reconnaissance over North Vietnam because, as we are withdrawing our forces, I have to see whether or not there is any chance of a strike against those forces that remain, and we have to watch for the buildup.

If our planes are fired upon, I will not only order that they return the fire, but I will order that the missile site be destroyed and that the military complex around that site which supports it also be destroyed by bombing. That is my understanding.

Beyond that, there is another understanding with regard to the bombing of North Vietnam which at a number of these press conferences and in my speech on November 3d and in four televised speeches to the Nation last year, I have stated. I restate it again tonight. At a time when we are withdrawing from South Vietnam, it is vitally important that the President of the United States, as Commander in Chief, take the action that is necessary to protect our remaining forces, because the number of our ground combat forces is going down very, very steadily.

Now if, as a result of my conclusion that the North Vietnamese, by their infiltration, threaten our remaining forces, if they thereby develop a capacity and proceed possibly to use that capacity to increase the level of fighting in South Vietnam, then I will order the bombing of military sites in North Vietnam, the passes that lead from North Vietnam into South Vietnam, the military complexes, the military supply lines. That will be the reaction that I shall take.

I trust that that is not necessary. But let there be no misunderstanding with regard to this President's understanding about either reconnaissance flights or about a step-up of the activities.

HISTORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR ON MICROFILM