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Rogers : " we would take whatever steps were necessary "

Protecting the withdrawal

Washington, DC

Both President Nixon and the Secretary of State, Mr Rogers, addressed stern public warnings to Hanoi last month of the circumstances in which the United States might resume the freedom to bomb North Vietnam which President Johnson renounced in October, 1968. President Johnson's renunciation was part of what is called an " understanding " with the North Vietnamese government, but it has never been clear beyond dispute what the other elements in the " understanding " were. President Nixon insisted in his press conference on December 11th that it permitted American reconnaissance flights to go on over North Vietnam ; it was because the communists had been firing on American reconnaissance aircraft, he said, that he had ordered the night of bombing in November.

Nobody would expect the North Vietnamese government, or indeed any government, to admit that this part of the understanding existed, whether it did or not. So, since there are critics to be appeased and misgivings to be assuaged at home, the Administration has been putting out bits of evidence to support its contention. Most persuasive is the fact that the North Vietnamese have refrained from firing on 95 per cent of the American flights.

What really troubles Mr Nixon and his advisers is that the 1968 rules, if that is what they were, are going to be increasingly difficult to apply in 1971 and 1972 as the Vietnamisation policy, the Nixon doctrine in its Indochina version, gathers momentum and the American forces there are cut down more and more. Mr Rogers, in his press conference last week, admitted as much when he pointed out that in the circumstances of 1968 no programme of troop withdrawals was being contemplated, so that the problem of what to do if the communists endangered the remaining American troops never arose.

It was this thought that caused Mr Nixon to substitute something new, " this President's understanding," when declaring what he would do " if the North Vietnamese, by their infiltration, threaten our remaining forces." He would, he said " 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." Mr Rogers later rubbed the point in some more : when it came to protecting the American forces during the process of withdrawal there would be no restrictions or inhibitions.

In effect the North Vietnamese are being told, under pain of retaliation, to co-operate in the execution of the Nixon doctrine in Vietnam. Just how fast the withdrawal will go is still uncertain. A White House official said firmly last week that the American force in South Vietnam would have been cut in half by the spring. That will leave about 265,000 men. Officials are talking informally of a level of 50,000 men remaining in the summer of 1972, the crucial summer when Mr Nixon will face his campaign for re-election. His representatives in Saigon have yet to admit that they can manage as soon as that with less than 100,000 ; the real target in Mr Nixon's mind may well be somewhere between those two figures.

In any case, a hazardous period has to be contemplated when the American troop strength has fallen below a critical level, usually thought of as about 200,000, but before the war, or American participation in it, has been wound up. All these calculations assume that no peace settlement is arrived at by the negotiators in Paris, a matter on which the Administration's

pessimism is unbroken. The North Vietnamese are being warned not to increase their rate of infiltration into South Vietnam, or to intensify the fighting there, while that critical period lasts. By the time it is over, the Nixon Administration hopes to have a self-supporting South Vietnamese military system in existence which the communists will be powerless to overthrow.

If the North Vietnamese are not to be permitted to threaten the American forces, then obviously they must not threaten the Thieu regime in Saigon. A degree of harassment is permissible, no doubt, but not much more than at present or the bombers go into action against the North. But what about communist operations in Laos and Cambodia? The stated American policy is to use air power against attempts to move men or supplies through these countries towards South Vietnam, or to establish base areas directed to the Vietnam campaign. But the practice is reported to go further, covering a wide variety of missions to assist the anti-communist forces.

Mr Rogers also described to a Senate committee last month the effort the Administration has made since last spring, when Prince Sihanouk was deposed, to equip, supply and expand the Cambodian forces without (except for one short, sharp operation) getting American forces involved. In this way Mr Nixon's advisers hope to keep the North Vietnamese gains in Cambodia within limits that they can tolerate. Asked in what circumstances he could foresee the use of American ground troops in Cambodia again, Mr Nixon said: "None whatever."

What he would do if the communists did too well in Cambodia remains a moot question. His advisers are emphatic that the importance of Cambodia to the communist campaign in South Vietnam was discovered this year, when the neutrality of Prince Sihanouk was replaced by open war, to have been much greater than American intelligence had ever realised. The main communist supply route all these years had not been the Ho Chi Minh trail, upon which so much American air power had been expended, but the port of Sihanoukville and the road north from it. As things now stand the communists can cut that road, apparently at will, but they cannot use it.

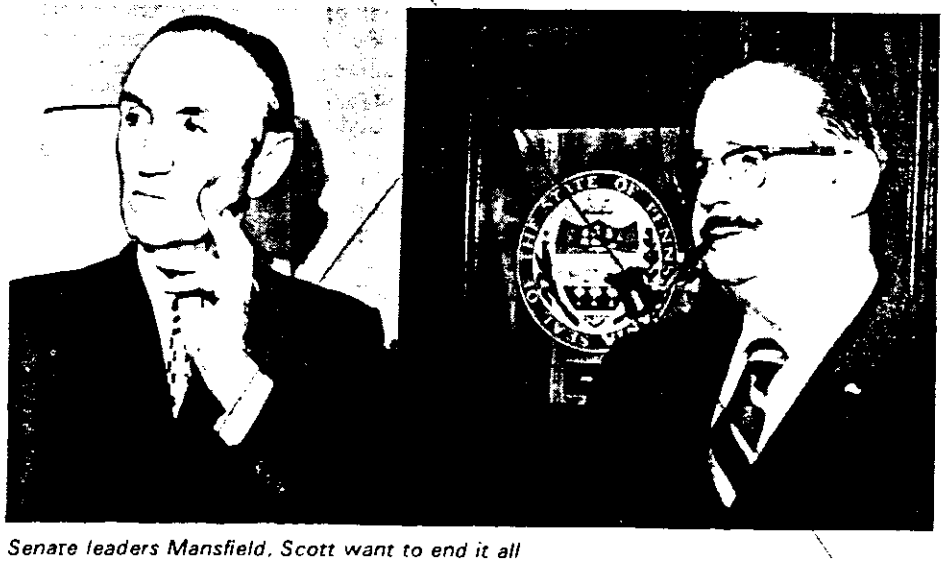
With the Cambodian route closed, Laos and the northern supply routes assume an importance which earlier they were thought to have but did not. A White House official remarked last week that the rate of infiltration of communist men and supplies along these routes had been "significantly stepped up." This meant, he explained, that it was now about 30 per cent higher than at the same time last year and about as high as before the Tet offensive in 1968. The Defence Department gives different figures, measuring not movements along the trail but arrivals at the South Vietnamese end of it, so that Mr Melvin Laird, the Secretary of Defence, has been able to say at almost the same moment that the rate of infiltration has fallen, not risen. Questioned on this, Mr Laird conceded this week that more North Vietnamese have been arriving in Laos. But, he said, they might be on their way to fight in Laos or Cambodia, not Vietnam at all.

Thus it looks possible, though by no means certain, that South Vietnam can be kept fairly quiet while the war rages on in the rest of Indochina. Something like this seems to be what the Administration is hoping for to permit the Nixon doctrine to work, if only in a limited and special se

The American prisoners in No Vietnam, however, present Mr Nix with another and threatening diff culty. Last week Mr Rogers reserve his harshest language for the North Vietnamese behaviour in relation to the prisoners. A policy of withdrawing by stages without bringing the war to an end does nothing for the unfortunate prisoners, whose plight has an emotional weight unrelated to their numbers—a weight which the fruitless raid on the prisoner-of-war camp near Hanoi in November did nothing to diminish. Mr Laird, for one, has shown himself keenly aware of the difficulty: he told a Senate committee last month that without a resolution of the prisoner-of-war question "the Vietnamisation programme cannot be completed as far as I am concerned" and "an American presence" in Vietnam would have to be maintained. Since none of the overtures, and none of the scolding, directed to Hanoi on this subject has ever produced a flicker of interest, this pledge may take years to discharge.

Congress at its worst

This year's legislative log-jam, probably the worst that Washington has ever seen, has brought Congress into such disrepute that the reformers have an almost unanswerable case for action. The jam was broken at last this week, helped along by a timely hint from the President that, if Congress did not get down to work, he would force most of the same men and women to inaugurate the new Congress next Monday when it takes over officially; they had been counting on over two weeks' holiday. Two bills that were causing most of the trouble in the Senate—the objectionable measure imposing import quotas and the President's important family assistance plan—have simply been jettisoned; if they are to be revived the new Congress will have to start work on them from scratch. The Senate's hope was to clear a way for the bill raising social security benefits but leaders of the House of Representatives have said bluntly that to reconcile the two versions in the time



Senate leaders Mansfield, Scott want to end it all