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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

Ron Nixon

info

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The President's views on Vietnam

By Godfrey Sperling Jr.

Washington

This, previously unrecorded incident, becomes relevant as the Vietnam war begins to heat up again:

It was in early December of 1965, Gerald Ford, sitting in his House minority leader's office, was informed that the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, was calling on the phone.

There were a few pleasantries between the two men. But soon the thrust of the McNamara call became clear. The Secretary of Defense was saying that the Vietnam war had become "very, very serious." The Johnson administration, Ford learned, was now thinking of a tremendous troop build-up in Vietnam.

Already around Washington, there were rumors that the build-up of total U.S. forces might go to some 350,000 from the then current commitment of roughly 180,000. But McNamara was making the surprising disclosure to Ford that the ultimate U.S. troop involvement in Vietnam would reach 500,000 or higher. Or, at least, that was the way Ford interpreted what was being said.

But Mr. Ford was also learning, he later said, that the administration was giving some consideration to the pros and cons involved in a declaration of war.

Mr. Ford concluded from the conversation that if President Johnson did not ask for a declaration of war he might, at the very least, come back to Congress again for a vote of confidence — one that would seek renewed support similar to that of August, 1964, when Congress overwhelmingly approved the Johnson

resolution supporting U.S. armed action in Southeast Asia (the Gulf of Tonkin resolution).

Of course, Johnson did not move toward either a declaration of war or a further congressional resolution in support of the Vietnam war. But the Johnson-McNamara intentions of eventually escalating the U.S. commitment to 500,000 did, of course, come about.

Mr. McNamara wanted something specific from Ford that day. Would Ford support this enlarged troop commitment? Would he provide the kind of bipartisan help for this build-up in the House that Senator Dirksen, the GOP leader in the Senate, would give in the upper House?

Ford was polite but noncommittal. He had already come to the conclusion that Vietnam was not a war which could be won through a tremendous commitment of American manpower on land. He saw Vietnam to be an endless war if fought in this manner. But he was not a "dove," by any means. He thought and said that the U.S. should stop the North Vietnamese encroachment into South Vietnam. He believed the U.S. had an obligation to do so. And he, at that time, supported the "domino" theory that if communism were not stopped there it could well keep moving forward in that area of the world, swallowing up other countries which were in the non-Communist orbit.

Ford, at the time, was a believer in unleashing tremendous U.S. bomb

power, along with the mining of Haiphong harbor. In this respect, he may have been more of a "hawk" than the President, since he advocated military actions which Johnson rejected simply because he thought they might provoke the entry of Peking and/or Moscow into the war — with the additional possibility that a nuclear holocaust might ensue.

But Mr. Ford came to take new views on the war as it dragged out. In time, like some other "hawks," he wanted the U.S. to get out because he saw it to be a "no-win" war. But, unlike other hawks, he early came to the conclusion that the unleashing of air and naval power would not win the war. Thus it was that he, along with Melvin Laird, was supporting a plan for the U.S. to pull out gradually from Vietnam months before Richard Nixon became president.

The Ford approach to wars like Vietnam thus remains fuzzy. But he is saying that he will not bring the U.S. back into that war. And, through his spokesman, Ron Nessen, he has specifically ruled out naval action and bombing as well as a troop commitment.

Those close to Mr. Ford say he learned a lot from the U.S. experience in Vietnam. They say that by nature he is not and never will be a "dove." But they insist that despite his call for increased military aid for Saigon he wants no part of a reentry into the Vietnam war.

Mr. Sperling is chief of the Washington bureau of The Christian Science Monitor.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

January 22, 1975

ADMINISTRATIVELY CONFIDENTIAL

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FROM: JERRY H. JONES

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-- Information.