

# Joseph Alsop <sup>5-1</sup> <sup>6-3-69</sup> How Long Has Nixon Got?

WASHINGTON — For the first time, the outcome at Midway seriously raises the question that everyone has been so tediously discussing in the abstract. The question is, how long has President Nixon got to solve his problem in Vietnam?

The President plainly believes that the answer is "Rather longer than most people think." As predicted in this space the idea of an enforced coalition government in South Vietnam was publicly repudiated at Midway—which will be a sad shock for Hanoi. And the planned U.S. troop withdrawal, jointly announced by Presidents Nixon and Thieu, was no more than half the lowest previous forecast, again in this space.

To be sure, the 25,000 troops to be withdrawn will include combat troops as well as support troops. One may guess that Gen. Creighton W. Abrams does not much like the small diminution that will therefore result in the total pressure he can exert on the enemy.

Obviously, Gen. Abrams would prefer to use the improving capabilities of the South Vietnamese army to augment the total pressure on the other side. Obviously, both Abrams and the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not protest the troop withdrawal, despite the inclusion of some real fighting men, because they wanted to help the President gain time.

One may guess, further, that there will be another announcement of another troop withdrawal—perhaps toward the end of September or during October. Gen. Abrams will have a sufficient margin of support troops to spare another 25,000 at that time, if and when Hanoi has unsuccessfully played

"Charge of the Light Brigade" with another few tens of thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers this summer.

Mr. Nixon's strategy is of course a bit like the strategy of



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the Russian lady in the old story who threw the wolves a child from time to time in order to keep the wolf-pack from catching up with her troika. In any war, in other words, it is always better to exert maximum pressure within reason—which does not mean LeMay-like measures. And this rule is obviously broken by the present troop withdrawal, and will be broken by any others that may follow.

Yet Ho Chi Minh and the members of the Hanoi Politburo will no doubt be genuinely shocked by the message of Midway—and not just by the rejection of a coalition, already noted. What has been done falls far short of what Hanoi has been given every reason to hope for. Thus the Hanoi Politburo's post-mortems should last long into the night, and go, too, on for night after bitterly disappointed night.

The President undoubtedly intended to produce just that re-

sult, as well as doing the minimum needed to give himself room for maneuver. As to the latter problem, the President's judgment is not to be sniffed at, in view of the realism and long-headedness that he has known since taking office.

Yet there is also some interesting evidence on the other side. Daily, in truth almost hourly, Sen. Edward Kennedy is begged by someone or other to make himself the spearhead of attack upon Mr. Nixon. Without much care for the senator's own interests, all sorts of people are desperately eager to use him for their own purposes. And thus far, at any rate, the senator has not let himself be used.

At Fordham University last Saturday, Sen. Kennedy certainly delivered an impressive speech, criticizing the President on Vietnam. Quietly, rather coolly, the senator said no more than he really had to say in his position. But what was striking was how the speech was handled by the senator's staff.

If advance copies had been circulated in Washington, with whispered tip-offs that "this was the beginning of the real barrage," the Kennedy speech would have been on the front page of just about every newspaper in the country; and it would have been the lead story in most newspapers. Instead, the Kennedy staff treated it as just another commencement address.

No advance copies were provided. Thus their main attention to Sen. Edmund S. Muskie's closely similar speech. You had to study the day's news very closely to discover that Sen. Kennedy had spoken out at all. And in the same fashion, you now need a sharp eye to notice that Kennedy is not one of the sponsors of the new anti-Pentagon group on Capitol Hill, "Members of Congress for Peace Through Law."

Partly, of course, Sen. Kennedy is thus holding back, as he has every right to, because he is a deeply wounded man whose wounds have far from healed as yet. But as a politician, he is also just about as shrewd as President Nixon. One should not forget that.