

CAMPAIGN

Nixon and Hanoi Drive

Challenge to Vietnamization Strategy Brings Risks for Election Campaign

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WASHINGTON, April 7—Until a week ago, it would have been the most natural thing in the world for President Nixon to fly yesterday to Fort Campbell, Ky., to welcome home the 101st Airborne Division and to thank them for staying the course in Vietnam while he gradually turned the fighting over to the South Vietnamese. But Mr. Nixon found himself in Philadelphia yesterday morning addressing Roman Catholic educators, one of the reasons for the schedule was the inclusion in the White House of a referendum on the effectiveness of the Vietnamization strategy, which would seem oddly inappropriate at the moment.

South Vietnamese attacks have not only threatened plans but also shaken the capital. Until yesterday, political observers in Washington assumed that Mr. Nixon had positioned himself for reelection and that the war was riveted on the apparent inability of the enemy to organize an effective offensive.

Fragile Strategy

But the enemy assaults have changed all that, reminding the White House commentators how the odds of Mr. Nixon's reelection really are and how much depends for survival on the ability to keep the war under his control.

It has been written since the beginning about the ability of the President to keep peace exist in splendid isolation while controlling not only the working process of the world as well, but also the domestic front could make a serious impact on its own.

Since a two-year effort to control the courts and the country that he opposed school desegregation, the President could not prevent district judges in Denver, Indianapolis, Richmond and Detroit from ordering widespread transportation to end desegregation(?). Despite a devaluation of the dollar and the imposition of wage and price controls, he found that he could not single-handedly stem the tides of international economics or change the rhythm of supply and demand for cattle and hogs.

And despite a long lull in the fighting, dramatically decreased casualties and frequent public declarations that Vietnamization would succeed, he found that he could not control the wishes of the political leaders and military strategists of North Vietnam.

Delicate Challenge

In strictly political terms, however, the new round of fighting in Vietnam presents him with a different and more delicate challenge than the crises at home. It cannot, his advisers concede, be finessed. Confronted with court decisions mandating ending, Mr. Nixon could and did propose legislation to stop it, establishing thereby a visible and salable position on the issue. Faced with rising food prices, he may still impose sanctions

on the farmers, and while that would anger the farmers, it would probably command the sympathy of housewives.

But in Vietnam his room for manipulation and management is smaller, and his mandate less clear. As his associates privately concede, the remoteness of the enemy, the weariness of the American people and (ironically) the momentum of his own long-term policies have been tried to limit his maneuverability.

To pull out completely in response to the enemy offensive for instance, would brand victory as a failure, betray his own word, he has so often promised as "honorable" and to the fighting, and might not even please his critics on the left, who would promptly ask him to be pulled out within three years, not at all less cost.

Possible Risks

For Mr. Nixon to pursue the opposite strategy—re-escalation of the conflict on the ground, including perhaps a dramatic landing behind enemy lines—would not be inconceivable given the President's penchant for the "bold stroke." But any such course would seem to require more troops than Mr. Nixon's withdrawals have left him with—the ceiling will be 69,000 on May 1—and would risk immense public furor.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the Washington Special Action Group, headed by Henry A. Kissinger, deliberated this week not about extreme possibilities but about ways of preserving Vietnamization by the only tools left to preserve it—namely, American airpower—and the debate revolved around questions of how big the raids ought to be and how deep they ought to go.

Mr. Nixon's associates, Republicans and Democrats alike, are aware of the fact that even if he were to establish a new Vietnamization means (Mr. Nixon has used his power before, but not to the extent that he has now), it carries political risks, especially if he finds himself forced to invoke them again and again.

The enemy thrusts a front-page news, which means that Mr. Nixon's counter thrusts will be front-page news.

And this can only be painful to a man like George McGovern, a peace candidate and harmful to Mr. Nixon, who has said privately that he would threaten to pull the rug out from under any opponent who attempted to profit politically from the war in Vietnam.

Early Warnings

The interesting thing about Mr. Nixon's predicament is that it has not taken him fully by surprise. Even though he received different estimates on when the enemy would attack and is still receiving wildly different estimates (to an embarrassing degree) before his Moscow trip, to force him into a more generous settlement in Paris, to drive him from office) on why they are attacking.

Back in the early days before and after his inauguration, Mr. Nixon conducted a private debate between his natural inclination to resist Communist expansion at every turn and his political soundings, which told him to disengage.

His solution was to quit the war at a pace that would honor his commitments and his own instincts. Yet all along he knew that such a course would demand energy on the part of the South Vietnamese, patience on the part of the public and caution on the part of the enemy.

It would, in short, require the purchase of increments of time to see him through Election Day, and what troubles the White House now is that the North Vietnamese may have determined to stop the clock.

If this reasoning is accurate, and if Hanoi is successful in keeping the war on Page 1 for months to come, the campaign may yield an interesting and (to Republicans) discouraging symmetry.

For Mr. Nixon may find himself campaigning in the fall not as the bold voyager to Peking and Moscow, or as the architect of world stability—a role he would very much like to play—but as the defender of the same commitment that unhinged the Democrats four years ago.