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Nixon took slow peace road, secret 1969 minutes reveal

WASHINGTON — We have had access to classified documents which shed new light on the controversy over whether President Nixon "missed" an opportunity to end the Vietnam War in 1969.

The North Vietnamese sent out several signals after the 1968 election that they were willing to make peace with the new Nixon

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Administration. These ranged from guarded messages to military pullbacks.

The messages, some more vague than others, reached Washington through a variety of channels. But more impressive was the withdrawal of 22 of 25 regiments from the two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam.

The key to the controversy lies in the interpretation of these moves. The new President chose not to regard the messages as serious peace overtures. He also interpreted the withdrawal of the 22 regiments as a military redeployment rather than a political signal.

The Nixon attitude

The minutes of a secret White House meeting on Oct. 28, 1969, summarize the Nixon attitude. Speaking for the President, Henry Kissinger declared:

"We have mentioned 'cease fire' (to Hanoi) in various connotations. If they want a reasonable compromise, we will meet them half way. If they insist on American humiliation, we will resist."

He held out hope the North Vietnamese, despite louder growlings from Hanoi, would come to terms. "The Hanoi tactics are the use of unbridled ferocity," Kissinger said, "until just before they are ready to settle."

He outlined a two-track strategy for peace. "The rapid road would be negotiation," he said, "the slow road Vietnamization."

The slow road

President Nixon has traveled the slow road. His intelligence estimates warned that a Communist takeover in South Vietnam was inevitable. His Vietnamization policy, therefore, was aimed at delaying it, not avoiding it.

The President was determined to hold off the day the Communists took power in Sai-

gon, we must conclude, for his own political reasons. He simply didn't want the Communists in control of the south while he was running for re-election in 1972.

Optimistic estimate

He had reason to regard Communist control more as a political problem for himself than a serious menace to the United States. For at the time of his inauguration, the National Intelligence Estimate was cautiously optimistic about the effects of a Communist takeover.

There would be damage, according to the estimate, to U.S. prestige and credibility among other Southeast Asian nations. But the document stressed:

"While some Southeast Asian leaders would probably entertain doubts about the will of the U.S. to play a security role in the area, we do not believe that they would be panicked into precipitate changes in policy or posture."

Wait-and-see stance

Instead, the document predicted these leaders would take a wait-and-see stance.

The estimate also offered a virtual point-by-point rebuttal of the so-called "domino theory" which the Johnson Administration had so often used as its rationalization for continuing the war.

The document declared, for example, that Hanoi no doubt hopes to extend its control over Laos and Cambodia but would probably hide its time.

Looking ahead

"They might fear some risk of a new U.S. military response," it was suggested. "Moreover, Hanoi would be preoccupied for a time at least with the formidable task of consolidating Communist rule in South Vietnam."

The estimate gave this forecast about relations between Hanoi and Peking in the event of a Communist triumph in the South:

"It is possible. . . that the two countries would draw closer together. . . It seems more likely, however, that Hanoi would wish to take the opportunity to establish quite clearly its independence of the Chinese, relying on a continued Soviet and available Free World" assistance.

Slightly different version of same column (SFChronicle 18 Aug 72) includes the following:

Whatever the intelligence assessment, however, President Nixon's political assessment was that he couldn't afford to lose South Vietnam to the Communists before the 1972 election.

Perhaps he is right that the "rapid road" to peace, via negotiation, was illusory. But the "slow road," which he elected to take, has cost more than 15,000 American lives since he took office.

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