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Tensions Over Vietnam

Anxiety About the Next Steps Grows As Washington Gets Gloomy Reports

by Max Frankel

Washington, May 1 - The impression is growing here that North Vietnam's capacities for sustained challenge in South Vietnam have been underestimated and perhaps misjudged as badly as they were during the engagements in Cambodia and Laos in 1970 and 1971.

..... There is anxiety about the military estimates because large diplomatic and political stakes ride on them. There is anxiety about the forbearance of the American public. And there is anxiety about President Nixon's threatened retaliation if he should come to feel betrayed or trapped by events.

..... Mr. Nixon has always been plagued by the fear that he would be viewed - and treated - as weak in international maneuver. That is why he sees peace in the Middle East and in Europe at stake in the current battle and why he recommitted himself last night to do everything possible to protect "respect" for the Presidency of the United States.

Respect for strength is what the President believes he achieved in Peking and what he credits for the new progress in arms control leading to his Moscow visit in three weeks. Those achievements are the ones he had hoped to emphasize in his bid for re-election, while Vietnam slowly faded from the news.

If the North Vietnamese can sustain their challenge in the months to come, it will upset that Presidential game plan. The early signs that the challenge will indeed be even greater than expected are said to be driving Mr. Nixon to private expressions of distress and anger.

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