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News Analysis

Nixon Gamble -- Risk Big War to Win Small One

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By Keyes Beech
Chicago Daily News

President Nixon's decision to impose a naval blockade on North Vietnam is the act of an angry and desperate man. He has, in effect, matched Hanoi's all-out offensive to conquer South Vietnam with his own last roll of the dice.

It is a staggering gamble.

He is risking a big war to win a small war. He is telling the Russians — and the Chinese — they may not deliver arms to North Vietnam but that the United States can and will deliver arms to South Vietnam.

In doing so he has invited a confrontation with the world's two great Communist powers at a time when he was moving toward an accommodation with them.

Moreover, by a single stroke, he is attempting to achieve a victory that has eluded the United States and its allies for more than a decade.

He could — although the possibility is remote — get away with it. Neither China nor the Soviet Union wants to go to war over Vietnam. But it seems inconceivable that the two, competing as they are for Hanoi's allegiance, can afford to accept Nixon's ultimatum.

Regardless of the response from Moscow and Peking, there can be no doubt what Hanoi will do. For the hard and faceless men who run North Vietnam there can be no turning back. They write their own ticket. They accept aid but they do not take orders from Moscow or Peking.

It is possible the blockade could reduce Hanoi to military impotence — if Nixon can make it stick. But there is little or no prospect that it will stop Hanoi's current offensive.

It is easy to believe the Communists when they say they have stockpiled enough war material to continue their offensive. And in any case it takes weeks or months for war supplies unloaded at Haiphong to reach the fighting front.

There is nothing new about Nixon's decision to bomb the two rail links linking Hanoi with China. That was done during the 1960's.

An estimated 50,000 Chinese soldier-laborers were sent into North Vietnam to keep the rail lines open. They were withdrawn when the bombing ended in 1968.

But in imposing a naval blockade — although Nixon was careful not to use that word — the President took a course that Lyndon Johnson shied away from in 1967.

That I know from personal experience. During an interview with Johnson in May, 1967, I asked him if he intended to bomb Haiphong.

"I'm not going to say whether I will or whether I won't," Johnson said. "An awful lot of good people come in here and tell me that's what I ought to do."

"But sure as hell if I did, one of our pilots would drop a bomb down the smokestack of one of those Russian ships out there in the harbor. And next morning, after Russia had declared war, all those good people who wanted me to bomb Haiphong would come in and say:

"Mr. President, that ain't what we meant at all."