

NST
4/19/72

The Challenge:

A Crucial Test for The Nixon Policy

WASHINGTON — In the basement of the White House there is an area full of reassuringly modern communications equipment that its known to its inhabitants as the Situation Room. In the middle of the complex there is a small conference room insulated from the surrounding commotion by paneled walls. It was to this room that Henry A. Kissinger summoned President Nixon's senior advisers last week, and their mood was as sober and serious as the news clattering over the teleprinters outside.

The North Vietnamese had moved across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) to launch massive, coordinated attacks on South Vietnamese strongholds, thereby putting the Vietnam war precisely where Mr. Nixon did not want it—back on page one—and raising an ominous challenge to the President's election-year hopes.

By the end of the week the South Vietnamese seemed to have stiffened their resistance. Nonetheless, there was little question that the enemy attacks had severely shaken the Administration, confronted Mr. Nixon's military advisers with hard choices and caused his political strategists to question his three-year effort to engineer an American withdrawal from Vietnam by Election Day without simultaneously sacrificing Vietnam to the enemy.

Most analysts here saw the offensive as an all-out effort to discredit the Vietnamization program, shatter South Vietnamese morale, weaken Mr. Nixon's hold on public opinion at home and force him to offer more generous terms if and when the suspended peace negotiations resume in Paris.

Asked on Monday what the President would do to help South Vietnam in its moment of trial, White House spokesmen said Mr. Nixon was keeping his "options" open. But he did not seem to have many options left.

To withdraw completely from the conflict at this critical moment would be to concede the failure of Vietnam-

ization. It would seem to many to be an abandonment not only of Mr. Nixon's pledge to find an "honorable" solution in Vietnam but his own oft-stated concerns about the "credibility" of America's pledges overseas.

The President's withdrawal program has reduced American forces in South Vietnam to 95,000 men—including only 6,000 or so ground combat troops—and indications have been that the number would drop to 35,000 by Election Day. Reintroduction of ground troops at this point would have enormous political impact. It would amount to a public vote of no confidence in the South Vietnamese and an invitation to a renewal of sharp domestic dissension over Vietnam.

The President spent most of Monday on the phone—with Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with Melvin Laird, his Secretary of Defense, and with William P. Rogers, his Secretary of State — receiving estimates of the fighting and debating the alternatives. In the end he won support for his own tentative decision that if the fighting worsened the United States should seek to stem the enemy offensive by the only means available—air power.

The President assigned the task of devising detailed options to the Washington Special Action Group, a team of planners headed by Mr. Kissinger and including representatives of the State and Defense Departments, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Joint Chiefs of Staff that meets at moments of emergency. The group met daily in the Situation Room until Mr. Nixon left for Florida late Thursday.

And to his press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, Mr. Nixon entrusted the propaganda war, instructing him to devise some way of portraying concern and preparing the public for retaliatory action without conveying or creating a sense of panic and failure in the White House itself.

The solution, devised in morning huddles among Mr. Ziegler and his counterparts at Defense and State, Dan Henkin and Robert McCloskey, was to impose on State and Defense the burden of enunciating Government policy and articulating official fears and hopes without directly committing the authority of the President to any particular argument or line of reasoning.

It was Mr. McCloskey, for example, who first pointedly called attention to the enemy's reliance on Soviet-supplied equipment — not the White House, whose occupant still wishes to go to Moscow and has no interest in engaging in personal name-calling with the Soviets. And when the first massive retaliatory raids began Thursday, Mr. Nixon — who of course had

ordered them to begin—was well away from the scene making a speech and shaking hands in Philadelphia.

As devised by the Special Action Group in conjunction with the United States commanders in Vietnam, the massive air strikes Thursday and Friday went well beyond the concept of "protective reaction" used by the Administration to justify earlier retaliatory raids.

Mr. Laird, speaking for the Administration while the President rested and conferred with Mr. Kissinger in Key Biscayne, said the bombing would continue until Hanoi withdrew its tanks and troops. Admiral Moorer said the planes were bombing targets up to 40 to 50 miles north of the DMZ. Other sources said the "upper limit" would probably be the 20th Parallel, about 200 miles above the DMZ and about 70 miles south of Hanoi.

In domestic political terms, the present round of fighting may yet prove to be acceptable. Much depends on how long it lasts. If the South Vietnamese show themselves capable of mastering what is clearly their sternest test in a year, it would strengthen the credibility of Mr. Nixon's withdrawal strategy.

But if the South Vietnamese fail to stem the tide, even with American air power to help them, or if the attack proves to be only one of a series of intermittent enemy offensives, each requiring new doses of American help, it may occur to the American public that the war, after all, is not going to disappear.

If this idea were to take root, Mr. Nixon's speeches about a "generation of peace" might begin to sound hollow. And his inability to shed an old commitment could make him yet another political casualty of the Vietnam