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## Washington: The Role of the Vice President

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Aug. 18—For many months now, the Nixon Administration has been debating privately the best way to make the South Vietnamese take over the defense of their country and speed up the withdrawal of the American expeditionary force. Should the Saigon regime be assured of Washington's support indefinitely, or should it be told, publicly or privately, that the American troops would be called home by a certain date?

This has been a serious debate inside the President's official family. Some of Mr. Nixon's advisers have felt that setting a deadline for the American evacuation of that country would confuse the Saigon regime and lead to a disaster. Other Nixon advisers have argued that unless the President told Generals Thieu and Ky precisely when the Americans were leaving, the South Vietnamese leaders would never really take over the defense of their country.

### The Private Debate

It would be hard to overestimate the sincerity of this private debate within the Nixon Administration, but the President's decision was perfectly clear. He opposed his advisers

who wanted to give a specific date for ending the shooting and evacuating the American troops. He felt that this would encourage the enemy to keep on fighting and to refuse a negotiated compromise. Therefore, he was worried about the attempt of Senators George S. McGovern of South Dakota, and Mark O. Hatfield of Oregon to legislate a deadline for American involvement in Vietnam.

### Agnew's Attack

The interesting thing about this is how the Administration dealt with the problem. It didn't concede that there was something to the argument for a deadline on American involvement in Vietnam, which some of its own supporters had recommended. It attacked McGovern and Hatfield as if they were traitors to the Republic, and as usual Vice President Agnew was the chosen instrument of the attack.

According to the Vice President, the McGovern amendment was "irresponsible" action which would assure a "humiliating defeat." Mr. Agnew gave no indication that the idea of a withdrawal deadline had been seriously debated within the private counsels of the Administration itself. He conceded that his charges against McGov-

ern and Hatfield were "among the strongest I have already made since I took office as Vice President," but, he added that "no more dangerous proposal has been presented to the American Congress in those nineteen months—or in nineteen years... They are horribly wrong, and if their grave error is enacted into law, generations of Asians and Americans will suffer for their blunder."

If the McGovern-Hatfield amendment was approved, the Vice President said, the nation would be defeated and humiliated, but if their amendment was defeated, "then this nation will not go down in humiliating defeat on the battlefields of Southeast Asia—I promise you that."

This is quite a promise, but in political terms it will undoubtedly be effective. As a matter of fact, the McGovern-Hatfield amendment never really had a chance of being accepted. It was too sharp a challenge to Presidential power and would not have been sustained by the Senate even if the Administration had never said a word.

But there is something in this Administration which makes it want to dramatize the confrontations it knows it can win, and make the Vice President the

spokesman of the dramatic confrontation, and this is interesting in historical terms.

Mr. Nixon played the role of the provocative party spokesman under President Eisenhower, and in the end came to wonder whether it was a good idea to have the Vice President always arguing, always taking a pugnacious party position. Indeed, he once asked to be relieved of this role and given the job as head of the Operations Control Board where he could be a more objective and constructive figure.

### Assigned Role

But, oddly, he has assigned to Vice President Agnew the role of leading the party interference, taking the extreme position, even on questions of peace and war. The President knows that setting a deadline for withdrawal from Vietnam has been a serious question at his own Cabinet table, but he unleashes his Vice President to denounce it as a wicked, partisan and even unpatriotic policy.

There is a lot to be said for the President's decision against announcing a deadline for withdrawal, but his tactics are harder to defend—especially when he unleashes the rhetoric of the Vice President.