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Washington Insight



What Mr. Nixon Is Trying to Say

Joseph Kraft

PRESIDENT NIXON'S recent connection with Joseph Alsop goes well beyond White House circulation of the favorable column on Laos. The President also called Alsop a couple of hours before the invasion was announced to clue him in on the joyous news in advance. And their association, it seems to me, says a good deal about Mr. Nixon's true intentions in Southeast Asia.

It is important to stress the almost unique character of Alsop's view. He is not one of those supporters of the Vietnam policy who chopped and changed when the going got tough. On the contrary, he is one of the few Americans who have been consistently serious about Vietnam.

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ALSOP HAS at all times argued that preventing a communist takeover in South Vietnam was critical to freedom and security throughout Southeast Asia and the world. He has understood that there was small chance for a rapid American withdrawal which would leave the Saigon regime in good position to defend itself successfully. And he has insisted that a good way to keep South Vietnam from going down the drain was to deal a crippling blow to the communist insurgents.

From that point of view, those who disagree are not merely wrong. They are knaves. Similarly, a President who resists the pressure to bug-out is pretty special.

Mr. Nixon may not buy this viewpoint completely. He has a lot of other considerations — public opinion, relations with

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Congress, the state of the economy — to balance off against going all-out in Vietnam.

But the President has obvious yearnings for the clean consistency of the all-out approach. He too has always been very serious about the importance of Vietnam. He too has wanted to deal the enemy a crushing blow before full American withdrawal.

When the President on top of all this underlines his connection with Alsop and his special views, something important is being said. It seems clear to me anyhow that Mr. Nixon is saying along with Alsop in the column distributed by the White House that he views the war critics as "downright eager to be proved right by an American defeat."

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IF THIS surmise is correct, the difficulties ahead hardly need underlining. The President is deeply committed in the most personal way to dealing a staggering blow to the other side. But the other side is good at absorbing blows and coming back. So Mr. Nixon is putting himself in the position where he will have to go back into the breach over and over again.

That means that the lid is off the list of possible actions compiled long ago by the Joint Chiefs of Staff as possible ways to win the war in Vietnam. More bombing of North Vietnam is on that list of course. So is mining Haiphong Harbor. So is the invasion of the North talked up in South Vietnam last week by the Vice President, Nguyen Cao Ky.