

A Strange Success

By TOM WICKER

IN THE NATION

President Nixon's chosen policy of "Vietnamization" has greatly reduced the number of American troops and casualties in Indochina, while the non-Communist Government in Saigon has remained in power and—some say—strengthened itself. Can it be said therefore, that Vietnamization has been a success?

It cannot, despite Administration claims; in fact, the resumption of heavy bombing of North Vietnam for four consecutive days, with more unquestionably to come in the future, suggests that Vietnamization may be perilously near a failure.

Secretary Laird says that this furious round of bombing, which followed the appearance of MIG-21's over Laos as well as North Vietnamese ground successes in that country and Cambodia, was necessary to protect the remaining American troops in South Vietnam. If that is so, the obvious corollary truths are that those troops may now be vulnerable to a Communist onslaught, and that the supposedly stronger Saigon regime must be unable or unwilling to protect them.

That, of course, raises the question how anyone can expect that Saigon can long protect itself without the kind of American combat assistance it has had since 1965. This question is particularly sharp, since the opening of the Cambodian front in 1970 seems to have resulted mostly in an even greater exposure of the South Vietnamese flank along the common border.

Mr. Nixon can hardly be blamed for protecting American troops and, in fact, now rests most of his legal justification for any kind of military presence in Indochina on his constitutional necessity to do so. But bombing North Vietnam appears to be a costly way to go about it.

Such bombing, particularly if it has to be long sustained or often mounted, could endanger the President's diplomacy with Peking and Moscow. It shatters, with only the flimsiest justification in North Vietnamese actions, the "understanding" by which the bombing was halted in 1968, and therefore it renders even less useful the Paris negotiations that understanding was supposed to further.

Bombing the North, as Hanoi has been at pains to point out, further delays any possible release of American prisoners of war—and, to the extent our planes are shot down, increases casualties and the number of prisoners. Bombing spreads destruction wholesale, thus building North Vietnamese animosities and determination

both to resist and to strike back, as well as lowering American moral standing in the world. For all that, air power was not able to turn back Communist offensives in Cambodia and Laos, and if bombing North Vietnam now proves to have significant military effect on the ground in South Vietnam it will be for the first time in this war's long history of delusion and deceit.

Thus the bombing of the North represents an extremely high price that is having to be paid for the maintenance of the Vietnamization program. Yet that program has left substantial numbers of American troops in jeopardy, and evidently has not been able to make Saigon either self-sustaining or able to protect the remaining American troops. Worse, if history is a guide, even the high price the bombing represents will not necessarily buy success for Vietnamization.

It might nevertheless be said that Mr. Nixon has no choice but to bomb—if it could also be said that he had no choice but to adopt Vietnamization as his policy in Indochina. But that cannot be said; Vietnamization was not forced upon him by the objective situation but was, in fact, his own political decision out of several available.

He could have pulled American troops totally out of South Vietnam by now; or he could have announced a firm date by which they would all be removed; or, at the least, he could have acquiesced in any of the numerous efforts by the Senate Democrats to legislate a pullout date—thus giving such a pullout bipartisan backing, including that of most of his Presidential rivals.

Mr. Nixon might even have negotiated a coalition or interim government in Saigon; and if he could not bring himself to do that, he could have helped in last fall's South Vietnamese elections to bring to power a government committed to negotiation rather than to war. That might well have been done by insuring a really free election, instead of permitting President Thieu to manipulate it.

But Mr. Nixon chose Vietnamization, which does not appear to have achieved its ends, which may have put many American soldiers in jeopardy and has certainly left many American prisoners in their cells, and which must now be sustained by the costly bombing of the North. If that is success, what would failure be?