

The Endless Dilemma

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, April 11—The military crisis in Vietnam has at least clarified the policy of the Nixon Administration. In the name of protecting the withdrawal of American troops and prisoners from the battlefields, the President is now directing a massive air offensive against the enemy in order to prevent the defeat of the South Vietnamese Army and the overthrow of the Saigon Government.

This is at least a policy; but it is not a policy for getting out, it is a policy for staying in; not a policy for defending our troops, but a policy for defending General Thieu's command and his regime.

It is easy to see the political logic for Mr. Nixon in this course of action. Without the intervention of the American Air Force, the South Vietnamese, though they have an army of 1.2-million men and a militia half that size, might very well be overrun by the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong, and this would be a spectacular failure for the President's policy and a blow to his chances of re-election.

It is even easy to see the logic of his determination to smash the North Vietnamese invasion of South Vietnam and avoid the final crash of his policy and his allies; but at least the President should state these objectives for the Congress and the people, and not pretend that he has to revive this savage counterattack in order to get the troops and prisoners back home.

The argument for the air war, like the arguments for the U.S. invasion of Cambodia and Laos, is that this operation will not assure the withdrawal of our last 90,000 men, but force the enemy to settle on our terms; yet even after the enemy's offensive is turned back, as it undoubtedly will be, he will still be free to retreat into Cambodia and Laos and across the DMZ.

To achieve the President's war aims, the enemy's units must be destroyed and cut off from future supplies from the Soviet Union and China, and even the most optimistic planners here do not expect that.

Barry Goldwater has at least seen the flaw in the President's policy. He would carry the bombing to Haiphong. He would risk trying to cut the Soviet and Chinese war material before it can get to the battlefield, and also get behind the enemy divisions, now all but one in the South, and block their line of retreat.

Of course, this would risk war with both Moscow and Peking, but at least he does not fool himself that the enemy will quit and negotiate on our terms unless Hanoi has no way to retreat and get supplied for another offensive later on.

Short of trapping and destroying the enemy and cutting him off from

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more Soviet and Chinese arms, the President's policy of backing the South Vietnamese with air power whenever they get in trouble does not "end the war," which was Mr. Nixon's promise, or free the United States, which is his hope, but traps him and the Air Force in a war that is directed by Hanoi and Saigon.

If his objective is simply to end the war and get the troops and the prisoners back home, he can negotiate that very quickly. It would be dangerous and embarrassing, and there are solid arguments against it, but that is the policy of most of the Democratic candidates for the Presidency, and it could be done.

But if his policy is to prevent the conquest of South Vietnam and the defeat of the Thieu Government, then the consequences of that policy should be faced. For if Mr. Nixon is not really going to put the South Vietnamese on their own, giving them the tools to see if they can finish the job, but is going to back them with air power whenever they get in trouble, then all the South Vietnamese have to do to assure our continued presence in the air over the battlefield is to demonstrate their inability to defend themselves.

This has been so obvious for so long that it is almost embarrassing to go over it once more, but the fact is that the Administration is now dispatching more and more naval and air power to Vietnam—without telling the Congress what it is doing—and complaining about the Soviet supply of arms to Hanoi, while negotiating disarmament agreements and cultural agreements and trade and space agreements with the Soviets, so that the President can announce them in triumph when he goes to Moscow on May 22.

The contradictions in all this are both obvious and painful. You can defeat the North Vietnamese if you cut off their retreat and their supplies, and you can get your troops and your prisoners back home if you agree to get out all the way, but you can't defeat them or get out by withdrawing part way and leaving them to retreat, while you run for reelection on the ground that you can do business with the Soviets and the Chinese.

The President's answer to this dilemma is that he is merely hitting them hard because this will bring them to their senses and make them compromise, and that anyway he has to do all this to get the troops and the prisoners back home. But this is not a policy. It is a campaign argument, and a good one so far; but unless he can destroy the enemy, or persuade the Soviets to stop shipping arms to Haiphong, the war will go on, even if the present battle is won.