

Nixon's Strategy May Be Backfiring



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PRESIDENT NIXON'S strategy for settling the Vietnam War before the November election may have backfired on the battlefield.

In his secret approaches to Hanoi, the President has pressed for an early peace. He has tried to convey the idea that he will be much tougher to deal with after the election.

As the White House views it, Hanoi hopes to use the anti-war ferment in the United States as political leverage to gain a peace settlement on Communist terms. Mr. Nixon, therefore, has emphasized American politics in his secret soundings.

He has tried to impress Hanoi that he is favored to win re-election, that he cannot run for another term and, therefore, that he will be free of political pressure after the election. Hints have been dropped in both Paris and Peking that Mr. Nixon may be willing to take bolder action against North Vietnam after the election.

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THE POWERFUL North Vietnam drive across the demilitarized zone may have been a direct response to the President's arguments. Here's the picture as it has been pieced together in the White House:

The North Vietnam forces had been deployed along the demilitarized zone for years in a position for a direct invasion of the south. The U.S. intelligence community, however, never anticipated that Hanoi

would gamble this home force in an open invasion.

The Communist buildup had been detected in the central highlands and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex. But the worst that was expected was a limited offensive against a few psychological points.

The secret intelligence estimates suggested that the North Vietnamese might score a few spectacular victories but couldn't keep up a protracted war in the south. In the end, the South Vietnamese were expected to hold.

Now, General Creighton Abrams, the American commander in Vietnam, has warned Washington that the Communist offensive can be sustained for months. Apparently, a decision was made in Hanoi to commit the home forces to an open invasion of South Vietnam.

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THERE is a suspicion in the White House that Hanoi took the President at his word that he would be tougher after the election. With this in mind, the North Vietnamese may have launched the invasion to strengthen their hand before sitting down to serious, pre-election bargaining.

One thing is certain. Hanoi is throwing into the invasion troops, tanks, artillery and antiaircraft guns that previously had been held in reserve for the protection of North Vietnam. This unexpected assault across the demilitarized zone has completely upset our military calculations.