

Vietnam: "Getting Out" by Way of the Brink

What President Johnson and his predecessors steadfastly tried not to do over 15 years or more, President Nixon has managed to do almost overnight: he has brought the war in Indochina to the brink of a head-on confrontation with the Soviet Union by his decision to send American bombers over the suburbs of Hanoi and the port of Haiphong and to amass an American naval armada off the North Vietnamese coast.

There does not seem to be any other way to interpret what he has done. One could understand—if not accept—the monumental air support given to the South Vietnamese during the ongoing North Vietnamese offensive of the past few weeks, and the systematic substitution of our air power for our manpower in the months before that. One could see this as having something to do with bolstering the South Vietnamese forces, and even with "saving the lives" of our remaining troops. Leaving aside the cynical euphemism of "protective reaction," there were enemy tanks to be hit, and SAM missile sites to be taken out and trucks and roads and bridges to be blown up. You could even believe, but just barely, that most of this was being carried on in remote, unpopulated areas so that civilians were pretty much out of the way of it.

But you cannot believe that anymore about a reversion to bombing tactics which plainly endanger population centers and which cannot be related in any immediate sense to the fighting now under way south of the Demilitarized Zone and in the Central Highlands and around Saigon. Nothing that is blown up in Hanoi or Haiphong today is going to influence, in any direct way, the course of battle in the South for a good many months, perhaps even a year; we have ample evidence of that, out of long experience.

And you cannot seriously believe that this revival of the thumbscrew is directed at "the will of Hanoi" for we have more than enough evidence on this score, too: the thumbscrew, sometimes called "rolling thunder" (by the military) or "graduated response" (by the professors in residence in government), has never really worked. In the days of Dean Rusk and Walt Rostow, it didn't persuade the North Vietnamese to "leave their neighbors alone"—if anything it stiffened them—and there is no reason to believe that the effect would be any different now. Moreover, there is nothing "graduated" about what is going on.

So you have to assume that the Russians, who are the main suppliers of the heavy weaponry now in use by the North Vietnamese, are the main object of the weekend bombing strikes around Hanoi and Haiphong; that the President is reviving and applying what John Foster Dulles described as "the necessary art" and which his critics called "brinkmanship"; that he is seeking to persuade the Russians to use their benefactor's influence on Hanoi either to slow down the current offensive or to promote negotiations, or both; and that he is prepared, for lack of any other leverage, to throw Soviet-American relations into the scales, to put the SALT talks and the European detente and Russia's alleged anxiety over China and East-West re-

lations in general on the table, for the sake of salvaging whatever precisely it is that Mr. Nixon would conceive of as an "honorable" way out of the war.

There is a grim logic in this assessment. It fits the President's long-standing concepts about the utility of air power, particularly in Indochina; it is quite in keeping with his oft-expressed admiration for the way President Eisenhower supposedly achieved a Korean truce—by threatening the Chinese with nuclear attack. It accords with the Administration's own proud account of how Jordan was saved and a Middle East conflagration averted—by the maneuvering of American sea power in the eastern Mediterranean. It would be, in short, almost a classic exercise in balance-of-power politics of the sort that Mr. Nixon and Dr. Henry Kissinger have long espoused.

In other words, it figures—which leaves you to wonder only by what set of values, or what sense of American obligations or security interests, or what reading of American sentiment, it is necessary at this stage of the game to go to the brink with the Russians over Vietnam?

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We were told long ago of a plan "to end the war." Can this be it? Can the Russians, in fact, maintain their position in the world while telling their sister socialists in North Vietnam to abandon what they have been fighting for these forty years?

We were told that the South Vietnamese could "hack it by themselves." Are we now to believe that what this really means is that this country must not only continue to provide massive combat air support but also to confront the Russians with the twin threats of aerial and naval blockades against North Vietnam? Is this what "Vietnamization" is all about? Or isn't the real meaning of the Hanoi-Haiphong raids that "Vietnamization" doesn't work well enough to guarantee the President the kind of outcome of the current Vietnam fighting he could feel comfortable with, either in Moscow at next month's summit, or in the election campaign next fall?

This, in our view, is the nub of it—the sort of outcome the President wants and the risks that are worth taking to bring it about, for the risks involved do not seem to us to bear any relationship to the possible gains. If the President's "Vietnamization" policy is as successful as he would have us believe, we have done all that we could reasonably have been expected to do for the Saigon government and we ought to fix a date for our total military disengagement, negotiate as best we can for the return of our prisoners, and get out.

If "Vietnamization" turns out, in fact, to be less than it has been proclaimed to be, the end of it all in Vietnam may then be something well short of what we set out to accomplish, and some might even see it as "dishonorable." Against that ultimate, and still hypothetical judgment, however, you have to weigh the honor, not to say the sanity of trying to influence the outcome in Vietnam at this late date by resuming bombing in or around population centers in North Vietnam for the indirect and largely theoretical effect this may have on the actions of the men in power in Moscow or Peking or Hanoi.