

Tensions Over Vietnam

Anxiety About the Next Steps Grows As Washington Gets Gloomy Reports

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Reports From Abrams

WASHINGTON, May 1—The impression is growing here that North Vietnam's capacities for sustained challenge in South Vietnam have been underestimated and perhaps misjudged as badly as they were during the engagements in Cambodia and Laos in 1970 and 1971.

Government officials are extremely wary of discussing current intelligence estimates, or even of comparing them with the judgments of a fortnight ago. But the sense of doubt and foreboding is contributing to an ominous though unarticulated tension in this capital while discouraging reports from Vietnam keep rolling in.

There is anxiety about the military estimates because large diplomatic and political stakes ride on them. There is anxiety about the forbearance of the American public. And there is anxiety about President Nixon's threatened retaliation if he should come to feel betrayed or trapped by events.

Rarely is that mood expressed in so many words. Congress is remarkably placid about the war news, probably because members are confused and afraid to make matters worse. The State Department is engaged in technical quarrels with Hanoi about the mostly meaningless public statements on negotiating terms. The White House, trying to avoid the appearance of distress, was able to produce a positive headline tonight with news of the arms-control talks.

But the tension grows as the war news points in one direction while Mr. Nixon stiffens his threats and commitments in another. Addressing prominent Texas Republicans and Democrats last night, the President raised a warning of more bombardment of North Vietnam, even though most of his advisers think the issue must now be decided on the ground in South Vietnam, and he reiterated yet again his view, both global and highly personal, of the stakes of battle.

The basis of the President's sturdy resolve is the encouraging reports that he continues to attribute to his battlefield commander, Gen. Creighton W. Abrams. In perspective, Mr. Nixon said again last night, "We can expect some days when the news may be a South Vietnamese setback and other days when it will be otherwise." Indeed, some solace is drawn here from the heroic resistance offered by at least some of Saigon's troops.

But the developments that are being called comforting are not at all the comforts anticipated even a fortnight ago. From the perspective of a year, even the President's toughest assertions of endurance contain a retreating definition of his military objectives and of South Vietnam's achievements.

A year ago, in defining what he termed the success of the effort to cut North Vietnam's supply lines through Laos, Mr. Nixon argued that "as in Cambodia, what is important is not the instant analysis of the moment but what happens in the future."

He said the South Vietnamese had fought effectively against the "very best" troops the North could field. The disruption of enemy supply lines and the consumption of men and arms, he maintained, damaged North Vietnam's capability "to sustain major offensives in South Vietnam" even more than the earlier raids into Cambodia.

"Consequently tonight," the President asserted on April 7, 1971, "I can report that Vietnamization has succeeded. The American involvement in Vietnam is coming to an end. The day the South Vietnamese can take over their own defense is in sight."

Without directly contradicting those judgments, some of the President's aides painted a darker picture of the Laos venture. They said American mili-

tary commanders had badly underestimated Hanoi's ability to reinforce its major fighting units and to supply them with tanks and other heavy equipment. They said American air cover had been much less effective than predicted.

Nonetheless, the military estimate that reinforced the American negotiating position in secret talks with North Vietnam throughout 1971 was that South Vietnam had won a long respite from major enemy challenge, probably through most of 1972.

Even as the North Vietnamese offensive took shape a month ago, the analysts here were confident that the enemy could sustain it only for a few weeks before stretched supply lines and poor weather took their toll. Some setbacks in northern South Vietnam were expected, but by last week even that threat was minimized.

In recent days it has become clear that the North Vietnamese are expending supplies at a furious pace on at least three fronts, including some far from home. They are being resupplied much more effectively than had been though possible, and at least some American field commanders believe that the offensive may endure for quite a time.

Mr. Nixon, without conceding any change of estimate or expectation, is defining success now only in minimal terms. Last night he cited General Abrams's "professional judgment" that the South Vietnamese would "hold" and deny the North its goal — "which, of course, is to impose on the people of South Vietnam a Communist government."

'Desperate Gamble'

He went on to say that the North Vietnamese had "utterly failed" to rally the South Vietnamese to their side and still "control" less than 10 per cent of South Vietnam's population.

Whereas in early 1971 Mr. Nixon said that "the South Vietnamese by themselves can hack it," he said last night that to halt the American air and naval warfare in Vietnam and "get out as quickly as we can would mean, of course, a Communist take-over."

In essence, the President's view of the battle depends now on the estimate that the enemy offensive is a "desperate gamble" of limited duration and that Saigon need only survive it for a time to win at least two more years of relative calm.

The new fear among at least some officials and analysts is that Hanoi has again been underestimated, that its campaign will be sustained and progressively more difficult to bear, with unpredictable consequences on morale in South Vietnam, on the mood of the American people and on the response of the President.

Mr. Nixon has always been plagued by the fear that he would be viewed—and treated—as weak in international maneuver. That is why he sees peace in the Middle East and in Europe at stake in the current battle and why he recommitted himself last night to do everything possible to protect "respect" for the Presidency of the United States.

Respect for strength is what the President believes he achieved in Peking and what he credits for the new progress in arms control leading to his Moscow visit in three weeks. Those achievements are the ones he had hoped to emphasize in his bid for re-election, while Vietnam slowly faded from the news.

If the North Vietnamese can sustain their challenge in the months to come, it will upset that Presidential game plan. The early signs that the challenge will indeed be even greater than expected are said to be driving Mr. Nixon to private expressions of distress and anger. It was in that mood last night that he emphasized the risk that Hanoi was running, momentarily disregarding his appeals, through Moscow, for restraint and warned the North Vietnamese to "make their own choice."