

War Tide and Nixon's

By Samuel Lubell

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Of all the psychological victories scored by Richard Nixon this year, none has been more far-reaching than his gaining a free hand to resist pressures for quick withdrawal from Vietnam.

Congress may continue to debate and even pass resolutions demanding withdrawal by some date. In living rooms across the nation families with young sons will continue to argue intensely over "how can we get out?"

Still, if I read correctly my interviews of recent months, the public in the main is ready to:

- Chalk off expectations that we will be out by election time.

- Continue to "bomb them into giving up."

- Stay in Vietnam past the election to give Nixon time for a settlement which many voters say openly will "save face."

A Boomerang?

The war issue may still boomerang before November. It is more likely, however, that the mining of Hanoi's harbors will have settled the election and marked the birth of what may become known as the Nixon Coalition.

Ironically, Nixon's psychological triumph was precipitated by North Vietnam's Easter offensive, particularly its early successes.

In my interviewing at the time I was struck by how many persons reacted to the headlines of defeat by exploding in profanity and remarks like, "Don't crawl out on our bellies" or, "We can't run like a whipped dog."

A Denver housewife urged, "Ask for volunteers to go over and invade North Vietnam. Level the place and pull out."

High praise of former President Harry Truman began to pepper my notes. What people liked, it turned out, was that "He had the courage to drop the big bomb on those Orientals."

Tough Talk

My interviews show that it was the President's Hainphong action, and the Russian inaction, that started the big swing of Democrats and Northern Wallaceites to Nixon.

"He stood up to Russia and that took guts" was the general reaction. The rankling sense of a humiliating defeat was replaced by pride of vindication in what many voters, particularly the George Wallace supporters, had contended for years — fight it like a war, go in with everything.

Since then the dominant mood has been one of "show them who's boss" and

"don't let up until we bring them to their knees."

Many of the impassioned attacks on Sen. George McGovern reflect the anger that "he wants to back down when we have them on the run" or "he'd pull out just when we're winning."

Much of the pro-Nixon sentiment is anything but hawkish. His supporters say he inherited the war, or he's doing a good job getting the troops out, or no one could do better.

Will this pro-Nixon tide be reversed before the election?

Two factors are worth noting:

- First, much of Nixon's current war support reflects a demand for a military victory and even to destroy the enemy. A conciliatory election eve settlement might be resented as a cynical sell-out.

Chances

Big Intangible

An FBI agent in the Washington suburb of Cheverly, Md., and a security guard at the Bethlehem shipyards at Baltimore (Dundalk) expressed this thought.

- Second, more significant, is what may happen if, despite all the bombing, the North Vietnamese simply refuse to yield.

This is the great intangible that troubles much of the country. Today, many who support Nixon's tough policy do so with misgivings. Some complain "We'll be pouring billions into Vietnam when we should be feeding our own," or that "We shouldn't be bombing dikes and killing civilians."

But the keenest anxieties are voiced by parents who fear that the war may be lengthened — or even that we may be forced back in — so it would entrap their young sons.

A Mother's Fears

In almost every precinct sampled the same family argument goes on. "My husband calls me a quitter," said one mother in Rock Island, Ill., "but I don't see why we can't bring everybody home. I have three boys, and with what Women's Lib is saying about equal rights my girls will have to go too."

In West York, Pa., a grinder's wife, always Republican until now, said, "I'm becoming more and more concerned about the war. Our oldest son is 17 and we have four more coming up. The South Vietnamese are relying on us too much and not trying hard enough on their own. McGovern's war stand is his one good issue."

Often this cleavage on the war involves basic differences in life. In the Union Turnpike section of Queens, N.Y., a sanitation worker's

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wife explained, "I'm a good Catholic. We have to stop communism. We can't let up. Bomb them until they give in."

Husband Disagrees

Her husband shook his head, "They'll never give in. We'll have to compromise."

Two of their sons were free of the draft but the youngest one, now 17, worried them because "he has such free ideas."

The wife recalled, "Why, the other day a Negro with a cut on his face asked my son

for help. My son gave him a dollar. That was ridiculous, I scolded my son, the Negro would just go from one person to another asking for a dollar."

Disagreement

The husband, less rigid, remarked, "I tried to explain to my boy, why didn't you just give the man 50 cents?"

My own feeling, to sum up, is that no dramatic reversal in the current war mood is likely. That judgment reflects the responses given by people to the ques-

tion. "What does pulling out of the war mean to you?"

A Kenosha bartender replied, "It means pull out — period."

Other persons who start by replying, "We have to get out altogether" go on to add "buts" — "Leave an air force . . . have a base nearby so we can hold things under control . . ."

"Until the prisoners are released — keep our Navy there . . . stay in Thailand."

Perhaps these inhibitions against complete withdrawal are leftover effects of the psychological war over Vietnam that has raged in this country since at least 1964.

I have interviewed about the war through all those years but never have found so much confusion about what "getting out" means as today.

The phrase no longer has any clear meaning. Its use should be dropped if we are to stop fooling each other.

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