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The President and the Generals

By JAMES RESTON

In announcing the withdrawal of another 150,000 American troops from Vietnam within the next twelve months, President Nixon said "this far-reaching decision was made after consultation with our commanders in the field and it has the approval of the Government of South Vietnam."

The distinction is clear. He "consulted" his commanders in the field but didn't get their "approval." In fact, there was bitter opposition to this move both by General Abrams and by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the President is now caught between the antiwar elements who want him to get out faster and his military chiefs who want him to slow the retreat.

The Conflict

This is one of those situations where it would probably be wise to follow the Administration's slogan: Watch what we do rather than what we say. The main thing is that, despite the expansion of the war into Cambodia and Laos, despite the diplomatic stalemate in Paris peace talks, and despite the warnings of his military advisers, the President is sticking to the schedule of withdrawals and committing himself to a flexible but faster pull-back in the next year.

There are risks in this for the President, not only in Vietnam but within the Pentagon and the command in Saigon. For General Abrams is known to feel that the President has now reached the point of changing fundamentally the combat forces in the field without changing Abrams's mission.

What General Abrams is saying is that his troops are being taken from him faster than he thinks prudent in the present state of readiness of the South Vietnamese and the widening war by the North Vietnamese. What the President is saying, in effect, is what Senator George Aiken urged him to say long ago: "We've won, so bring the boys back home."

It would probably be a mistake for the antiwar elements at home and the North Vietnamese officials in Hanoi to ignore this increasingly difficult relationship between the President and his principal military chiefs.

He has not said when in the next twelve months he will cut the 150,000 but he has imposed his authority as Commander in Chief on his subordinates. He has given a somewhat rosier picture of the situation in Indo China than his commanders would make themselves, and therefore he is vulnerable to the charge — which President

Johnson would never face—that he has given them an assignment but not the men to carry it out.

The President's Warning

This was clearly in the President's mind in his latest report on Vietnam. "While we are taking these risks for peace," he said, "they [the enemy] will be taking grave risks should they attempt to use the occasion to jeopardize the security of our remaining forces. . . . My responsibility as Commander in Chief of our armed forces is for the safety of our men, and I shall meet that responsibility."

Here what the President says should be taken with the utmost seriousness. For if he personally takes the responsibility for withdrawing troops against the advice of General Abrams, and the enemy then launches an attack that threatens a major military defeat or even the destruction of Abrams's command, it is not too much to say that he will use any weapons at his command—any weapons—to avoid destruction of his remaining troops.

Anybody who has watched Mr. Nixon over the years is bound to understand how reluctantly he would reject the advice of his military commanders, how careful he would be to avoid an open confronta-

tion with them on a military judgment, and how violently he would react if he thought his decision was in danger of producing a massacre or even a humiliating defeat.

This is the new thing in the situation. He has left himself some leeway to keep most of the 150,000 in Vietnam until late in the twelve-month period. He has obliquely suggested a political compromise that would leave the Communists in charge of the areas they now hold, and he has surrounded it all with victorious rhetoric, which his commanders don't quite believe and even resent.

In short, Mr. Nixon is now approaching that delicate point of withdrawal which President de Gaulle faced in his retreat from Algeria. De Gaulle managed it only with the greatest difficulty, against the advice and, some thought, the honor of his responsible officers, and it was not accomplished without revolt among the officers.

President Nixon is not faced with anything so serious as this, but he is now coming into the most difficult part of his policy, and even those who might wish him to move faster, have to give him credit for sticking to the direction and pace of his retreat, even if he calls it by the name of victory.