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Compulsive Escalation

With terrifying speed all the tragic errors of escalation are being repeated in Southeast Asia. Once again a President elected on a pledge of extricating the United States from the Vietnamese morass is embarked on a delusive quest for peace through widening the war. And each plunge down that road to disaster is followed poste-haste by another and still another in a dismal replay of the futility ushered in by the initial escalation after Pleiku in February 1965.

The large-scale air attack on North Vietnam by American fighter-bombers this weekend did more than shatter the bombing halt ordered by President Johnson eighteen months ago. Coming just two days after the assignment of American troops to combat duty in Cambodia, the raid made it plain that the Pentagon is finding a receptive ear at the White House for its long campaign to strike at the enemy wherever its bases and supply lines may be.

This is a "domino" theory in reverse involving limitless risk and no discernible hope of success—a course rejected as too uncompromising even at the height of the Johnson military expansion.

Unquestionably, the Nixon Administration is encouraged by the conviction that the Soviet Union and Communist China are so busy with their mutual animosities that they will refrain from stepped-up action in support of Hanoi and the other Communist elements in Indochina.

Yet the history of all past escalation in this area has been that it stiffens the Communist will to resist, pushes up the death toll, brings no serious move toward the peace table and drives both Moscow and Peking into more vituperative anti-American positions.

This is a two-way process of gambling with human destiny. Much of the inspiration for the President's stance in Cambodia obviously derived from concern that Moscow's increasing aggressiveness in the Mid-east stemmed from a belief that the United States was a paper tiger.

What makes the current escalation doubly dismaying is its panicky pace. On April 20, from the relaxed setting of his ocean-front refuge at San Clemente, President Nixon gave the nation a reassuring report on the progress of Vietnamization and pacification. He was able to "say with confidence" that both processes were succeeding so well that another 150,000 American troops could be brought home.

Ten days later a much grimmer President was on television with a warning that the United States was in danger of battlefield humiliation that could topple it into the status of a second-rate power. Since then the area and extent of United States involvement have broadened so rapidly that even the defenders of the Administration's course have been left tongue-tied.

The first embarrassment was the disclosure that the Government Washington seeks to prop up in Cambodia was among the last to learn that American forces were en route to mop up Communist sanctuaries there. Comparable was the plight of such Administration stalwarts as Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott cut adrift with White House-inspired statements that renewed bombing of the North was a remote contingency, at the very time a hundred American planes were dropping bombs across the demilitarized zone.

The defeat in the Texas Democratic primary of Senator Ralph Yarborough, a Vietnam dove, will no doubt be taken by many around the President as evidence of popular approval of his new tough line. Mr. Nixon, by characterizing far-out elements among his campus critics as "bums," already has provided additional fodder for fear that much of his sudden militancy in Vietnam stems from a desire to divert attention from inflation, unemployment and other difficulties as the Congressional election moves into high gear.

The need in the conferences the President plans to hold tomorrow with four key Congressional committees is to get the focus back on deceleration of a war that, as Vice President Agnew acknowledged yesterday, the United States cannot hope to win and that makes impossible the attainment of urgent national goals. Making the war bigger is a formula for calamity, not extrication.