

Nixon's Two Audiences: Hanoi and the U.S.

By MAX FRANKEL
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WASHINGTON, Feb. 18 — A President's public statements in wartime always represent a simultaneous play to different audiences. Notably the battlefield enemy and the restive folks at home.

For that reason, it is difficult to separate in President Nixon's latest discussion of

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Indochina the words that were uttered for their immediate effect in Hanoi and those that offer significant

clues to his long-term strategy. Taken together, however, the President's responses at an informal news conference yesterday were plainly designed to convey an extraordinary degree of confidence in several respects:

¶He can now carry the war to the enemy physically and psychologically.

¶He does not have to bargain for a political compromise in South Vietnam as the price for American disengagement.

¶He is approaching the point where he can defend allied military positions and political interests in Indochina at a level that Americans will support.

¶He may, in the process, strike such an effective blow in Laos that he will wholly alter the complexion of the war and, in effect, win it.

Mr. Nixon left these impressions in very carefully chosen words, under a pattern of questioning that let him think through the subject and without the pressure of television cameras, which abhor hesitation or grimace. He was thus able to work at his objectives while the reporters could try to read his mind and intentions.

The President's short-range objectives relate directly to the current operation in Laos. As he explained, the allied purpose there is to cut or seriously disrupt Hanoi's "lifeline" to South Vietnam and Cambodia — the only significant supply route now that transshipment through Cambodian seaports is no longer feasible.

In a remarkably bold definition of the stakes, Mr. Nixon

said the North Vietnamese "have to fight here" — in Laos — "or give up the struggle to conquer South Vietnam, Cambodia and their influence extending through other parts of Southeast Asia."

He then tried to offer some powerful reasons to deter them from fighting back in a major way. He said the allies were ready for a fight, with the South Vietnamese already performing in a superior way and American air power supporting them without restriction.

Invasion Not Ruled Out

Moreover, he left open the possibility that the South Vietnamese might have to invade North Vietnam itself—obviously hoping that this would keep the equivalent of three North Vietnamese divisions tied down inside their own borders and unavailable for the defense of the Laos rails.

And he threatened major bombing reprisals against North Vietnam if Hanoi should attempt an end run through the demilitarized zone into South Vietnam. In fact, he said Hanoi's foreknowledge of such a response "means that they are not going to take it."

All this amounted to a considered Presidential statement that Hanoi could either "give up" in Laos without a fight or risk further escalation in direct proportion to the extent of its resistance.

But this statement in psychological support of the current battlefield engagement, was clearly not the full expression of Mr. Nixon's thoughts about the course of the war. He said that the rains in May would end the fight for the Laos trails for this season and he acknowledged that Hanoi could mount a sizable challenge to South Vietnam next year.

The continuing American withdrawal from ground combat, he said, will make 1972 "the greatest point of danger." Since he also expects to be standing for re-election next year, Mr. Nixon is known to fear a major effort by Hanoi to inflict heavy casualties upon the declining American force, designed to compel him to

American War Deaths Double to 51 in Week

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 18 (AP)—The United States command reported today that 51 Americans were killed in combat last week in Indochina, more than twice the previous week's toll of 24.

The increase was attributed largely to losses among the Americans supporting the South Vietnamese operation in Laos.

The command's weekly casualty report also said 217 Americans were wounded last week, a drop from the 367 listed for the previous week.

South Vietnamese casualties also climbed sharply last week, headquarters said, with 478 killed and 1,159 wounded, compared with 345 and 805 in the previous week.

The two commands reported 1,908 enemy soldiers killed last week, compared with 1,770 the week before.

The latest lists brought United States casualties in the war since Jan. 1, 1961, to 44,459 killed and 294,946 wounded. South Vietnamese battle deaths total 120,011 and the reported enemy toll stands at 701,058 killed.

He appears convinced that South Vietnamese and Cambodian soldiers, massively supported by American air and transport units, can keep the enemy forces off balance and undersupplied, at least for the foreseeable future.

And he seems to feel that such a level of engagement, combined with further American troop reductions, will make the war bearable politically within the United States.

So he is letting it be known that he will accept no limitations on the use of American air power, except the prohibition on nuclear weapons, either through pressure in Congress or the legacy of "so-called understandings" with Hanoi.

Mr. Nixon replied that the Paris talks no longer interested him except for the prisoner deal they might one day yield. Behind that suggestion lies the thought of many of his aides that the political risks of gradual disengagement, without negotiation, are now probably less than the risks of a political deal that would admit the Vietcong to a share of the power in Saigon.

The net impression left by these longer-term comments of the President as not so much that he is certain of winning the war soon as that he now feels confident he will not be defeated by it.

He has discounted any active intervention by Communist China. He thinks Saigon is "holding its own" in battle, and that, with luck and time, Cambodia too, will survive. To him, Hanoi seems hard-pressed while the home front seems reasonably well pacified.

It is clearly the most optimistic Presidential posture here in a long time, both on the surface and below.

make a total withdrawal or a quick bargain in Paris.

He is letting it be known that there is no real "time limit" on operations in Laos or Cambodia. In other words, the South Vietnamese will seek to keep the supply routes cut after the rains next fall.

And he is laying the groundwork for keeping a residual force of Americans in Indochina to support the Saigon forces — "enough Americans," as he put it, to give North Vietnam an incentive to trade their withdrawal for the release of American prisoners.

Quite apart from the chances of virtually winning the war in Laos in the next 90 days, therefore, the President is trying now to protect himself against serious setback next year. He is pleased to have drastically reduced the rate of American casualties in recent months.