

The Vietnam Trap

By JAMES RESTON

The United States and North Vietnam are now trapping one another in a tragic military situation, which benefits neither side, and might be resolved to the benefit of both by a fairly modest compromise.

The one clear change in the balance of power in Indochina is that President Nixon is withdrawing the American troops faster than ever before. Leaving aside the politics and diplomacy of the problem for a moment, this is the one plain fact—the American expeditionary force will be reduced by 70,000 in the next three months, leaving a total of 69,000 Americans in Vietnam on May 1.

At the same time, while Mr. Nixon is pulling out, North Vietnam is building up its reserves and apparently getting ready to launch an offensive through Laos and Cambodia against South Vietnam and the remaining American forces in the coming dry-weather season.

Here then the dilemma: The more Washington withdraws, the more Hanoi thinks it has a military advantage; and the more Hanoi tries to exploit that advantage by gathering its forces for an attack, the more Mr. Nixon orders his bombers into the air to intercept the enemy supplies along the Ho Chi Minh trails and prevent the concentration of North Vietnamese men and supplies before they can hit his dwindling power and his unprepared allied force in South Vietnam.

So the trap is set. The North Vietnamese are not waiting for Mr. Nixon's withdrawal, and Mr. Nixon is trying to bomb them into agreement.

Unfortunately, this dilemma is becoming an issue in the American Presidential election campaign. Muskie, Humphrey, McGovern, Lindsay and McCarthy are all saying that the problem could be resolved, if only the President would set a date certain for withdrawing completely from Vietnam, and they may be right; but he is the only President we have, and he is obviously not going to do it.

But this does not prove that Hanoi is right. The officials in North Vietnam seem to be determined, not only to defeat the regime in Saigon, but to humiliate the United States, and this is probably the one thing that American opinion will not allow. The people want out, but they don't want to have their dwindling command overwhelmed and dishonored.

Accordingly, it is not quite fair for Muskie, Humphrey, McGovern and Lindsay to put all the blame on President Nixon for not ending the war by setting a date certain for getting out.

The officials in North Vietnam cannot mount an offensive against the dwindling American forces and expect President Nixon to leave his command in jeopardy. Hanoi wants him to withdraw, and he is trying to withdraw, but they cannot get rid of his argument by overwhelming his military command. They should not be deceived: Washington is not Paris; American public opinion now is not like French public opinion at the time of the French defeat at Dienbienphu. On the contrary, if Hanoi tries to humiliate President Nixon, it will turn the American electorate to his side, and re-elect him in November.

The dual tragedy of Vietnam is that

Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon did not understand the psychology of the Vietnamese people, and now the North Vietnamese are in danger of misunderstanding the psychology of the American people.

The opposition to President Nixon on Vietnam in the United States is for compromise, but not for humiliation; for getting out of Vietnam, but not for getting out in rout and disaster.

Hanoi can get a compromise in this situation. It can get American power out of Indochina, if it will guarantee privately the honorable and safe withdrawal of American troops, and the release of American prisoners of war. Mr. Nixon can get a compromise if he will settle for that safe and honorable withdrawal and the release of his prisoners, without insisting that General Thieu and the Saigon regime must remain in power, backed by the American air force.

What Hanoi cannot do is mount a military offensive without being bombed, and what Washington cannot do is to bomb without increasing the opposition of Hanoi and the destruction of South Vietnam.

There has to be some kind of accommodation at some point, either in the Paris peace talks or through Moscow or Peking. Both sides have to deal with the realities of the situation. The Democratic candidates for the Presidency are not going to give Hanoi the answer. Hanoi is going to have to deal with Mr. Nixon, and he is offering them a compromise, which is probably the best they are going to get in the foreseeable future.