

Reston Reports

The Trap Built by U.S., Hanoi

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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 clear 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 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 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.

DATE

It is easy to think of ways in which this military dilemma could have been avoided in the past. Washington could have set a date for total withdrawal of its troops, as some of us thought it should, and Hanoi could have let the American withdrawal go on and waited without threatening an offensive, which might overwhelm the South Vietnamese and even humiliate the American forces as they withdrew.

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

The officials in North Vietnam cannot mount an offensive against the dwindling American forces, and expect 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 Dien Bien Phu. On the contrary, if Hanoi tried to humiliate Nixon, it will turn the American electorate to his side, and re-elect him in November.

PERIL

The dual tragedy of Vietnam is that 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 Nixon on Vietnam in the United States is for compromise, and 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. 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.

Analysis
and
Opinion