

Nixon and Quangtri

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IN THE NATION

WASHINGTON, April 3—The powerful North Vietnamese offensive across the demilitarized zone into Quangtri Province illustrates at once the weakness of the so-called Vietnamization program and the paradox of President Nixon's domestic political position.

General Giap's armored thrust into Quangtri, which threatens to lop that northern province off the rest of South Vietnam, is the second major military encounter between his forces and those of President Thieu, unaided by American ground troops. The first came during the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos, when the North Vietnamese had the advantages of being on the defensive and of horrendous terrain; so they quickly sent the South Vietnamese running home in disarray.

That victory might therefore be discounted, and Washington and Saigon could and did claim that the invasion had at least "bought time"—although "time for what?" could be a good question, since they have been claiming ever since that North Vietnamese infiltration down the Ho Chi Minh Trail was steadily increasing.

It is not going to be so easy to explain away a North Vietnamese military success this time. Intelligence about the time and place of an expected offensive appears to have been largely wrong. The relatively conventional attack initially rolled over what might have been expected to be some of South Vietnam's strongest prepared defensive positions. The North Vietnamese did take advantage of a cloud cover that held off American air power, but that is what any sensible

kin Gulf—can make the South Vietnamese forces anything like the equal of the North Vietnamese. Since "Vietnamization" already has been going forward for three years, the situation in Quangtri does not augur well for its future—unless, of course, unlimited American air power is made available for the unlimited future.

Mr. Nixon's defenses appear stronger on the home front. His recent television address apparently persuaded many Americans that he had made a more sweeping and fair peace offer than ever before; troop withdrawals have continued; and in breaking off the Paris peace talks, the President may also have made it appear that the other side is the recalcitrant party—when, in fact, the situation is more nearly a stalemate, with neither side willing to yield anything the other sees as significant.

The President has repeatedly warned the North Vietnamese and the world, moreover, that he will take strong action against anything that threatens the security of American forces in South Vietnam. Thus he has erected a strong propaganda position from which to strike back hard with his air power, not just at the invading forces but into the heart of North Vietnam itself.

The question is how long that position can be maintained. If more North Vietnamese attacks continue to require a Nixon response from the air, more Americans are going to get the idea that the war is continuing, rather than being settled. More Americans are going to see that a continuing war does nothing to return the P.O.W.'s — in fact, only creates more of them.

If the bombing of the North is resumed, and a great American air and naval force has to be maintained in Southeast Asia to prop up a regime that could not otherwise exist, more Americans are bound to ask themselves the purpose of such a policy, and what vital interest demands that it be continued. Mr. Nixon's political position at home, in relation to the war, may therefore be stronger at the moment than it is ever going to be again. What happens to his "generation of peace" theme, for instance, if a renewed bombing campaign causes the Soviets to cancel out his Moscow visit?

But the capacity for self-deception in this city, when it comes to Vietnam, seems limitless. Already it is being contended here that the North Vietnamese, in violating the DMZ, also violated the "understanding" of 1968, by which President Johnson agreed to stop the bombing of the North. Of course they did—but Mr. Nixon already had broken the "understanding" countless times with his massive "protective reaction" air raids into North Vietnam; did he really expect the other side thereafter to honor it anyway?

attacker would do and only points up the extent to which the South Vietnamese ground forces are dependent on American planes.

As this is written, in fact, the Americans are said to be gathering strength for the heaviest air attacks in years, and it appears likely that only their vast air power—which can be brought in from bases in Thailand and South Vietnam and from carriers in the Ton-



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