

## Vietnam 'Options'

The spreading Communist offensive in South Vietnam finally brings to a head the inherent contradictions in the Indochina policy followed by the Nixon Administration for the last three years.

The Administration has on the one hand progressively reduced the direct American military manpower commitment to South Vietnam, responding to the growing consensus that United States objectives in the conflict were not worth the requisite expenditure in manpower, material and national prestige, if indeed those objectives were obtainable at all.

The President has on the other hand, persistently refused to modify the fundamental goal that has dominated United States policy for two decades—retention of a friendly non-Communist government in Saigon. Since the Communists predictably have refused to accept on Administration terms the settlement of a war they have not lost—that is, a settlement that would assure survival of the Thieu regime—peace based on a political compromise has been impossible to obtain.

With the United States clinging to its political objectives while steadily reducing its military commitment, it was inevitable that at some point the other side would find conditions favorable for another attempt to achieve its own goals by military action. That moment of truth may have now arrived.

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The President and his aides gambled that when the showdown occurred—if it occurred—a foe believed to have been gravely weakened by earlier battles and by American air interdiction would prove no match for an expanded and strengthened South Vietnamese Army, backed by unspecified American air power. This is the rationale for the so-called Vietnamization program that now has been sharply challenged by the strength and early successes of the Communist offensive. The agonizing question for the President, for Congress and for the American people is to what extent should the United States intervene if the tide of battle should begin to swing decisively against Saigon?

Administration spokesmen have asserted that the President is keeping "all options" open. In fact, Mr. Nixon's options are severely limited. Having committed himself to disengagement from Vietnam, having repeatedly stressed South Vietnam's ability to fight its own battles, the President has a moral and constitutional obligation to consult with Congress before recommitting American forces—ground, sea or air—to expanded battles in an undeclared war that lost its vestige of legislative sanction when Congress repealed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

In weighing the options, the President and Congress must coolly consider the national interest—whether the goal of saving the present regime in Saigon is worth the heavy costs and risks of re-escalating the conflict. In our view it is not. It is at last time that Saigon fought its own battles. It is time that the President put his repeatedly stated faith in Vietnamization to the test.