

'Test Has Finally Come'

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*Administration Officials Are Cautious
But Optimistic on Vietnamization Fate*

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WASHINGTON, April 5 — Although they have yet to say so in public, the Administration's top policy-makers view the current North Vietnamese offensive as an all-out effort by Hanoi to discredit the Vietnamization program and shatter South Vietnam's political and military morale. The Administration's spokesmen have avoided any definitive public characterization of the attacks, but privately officials here indicate that they are struck by the degree to which the North Vietnamese have committed themselves.

Hanoi's extravagant use of troops, including elements of its strategic reserve, its commitment of scores of heavy weapons, tanks and missiles, and its abandonment of its traditional guerrilla warfare, are all regarded here as major departures.

Taken together, they are interpreted by officials here as a sign that Hanoi feels it will never have a better chance than now to improve its battlefield situation—and thereby its negotiating position.

Irony Is Pointed Out

The irony of the timing of the attacks by the North Vietnamese is not lost on the Administration.

"They have reverted to the sort of conventional warfare that we longed for in 1966 and 1967," one State Department official said with a rueful smile. "Unfortunately, they waited until we no longer had the forces there to deal with it."

United States combat strength in Vietnam is now down to seven battalions—some 6,000 men—and is no longer regarded as a significant factor in the Allied ground force composition.

Although 95,000 American soldiers remain in Vietnam, a vast majority of these are logistical and support troops, including air units. As a result, the fighting on the ground during the current offensive will be virtually all Vietnamese.

To most Administration officials, this battlefield test of Vietnamization seems to be welcome. "We've been arguing the merits of this program for years," one American officer said this week, "but no one, not even the South Vietnamese, will ever have confidence in it until they prove themselves in battle."

One reason the Administration has held back this long from heavy retaliatory bombing inside North Vietnam, the officials said, has been to underscore the Vietnamese nature of the fighting.

The White House seems determined not to exercise its options prematurely. Bad weather and the probable domestic political consequences of resumed heavy bombing of North Vietnam have also been considerations, of course, but, as one official put it today, "now that the test of Vietnamization has finally come, we don't want to dilute it unless we have to."

Three-Front Plan Seen

In tactical terms, United States intelligence officials expect the enemy to do its utmost to mount a three-front offensive by attacking in the Central Highlands around the cities of Kontum and Pleiku and in Tay Ninh and Binh Long provinces, northwest of Saigon.

They anticipate that the fighting will continue sporadically for the next month, intensifying first on one front and then another.

One goal of the North Vietnamese seems to be to capture and hold—at least temporarily—one or more provincial capitals, just as they held the citadel in Hue for 28 days during the 1968 Tet offensive. If possible, they also may attempt to give the Vietcong additional legitimacy by declaring one of the provincial towns the capital of the Communist Provincial Revolutionary Government.

While they are by no means sanguine about the outcome of the fighting, the Administration's policy-makers privately voice doubt that the North Vietnamese will achieve their goals. They say they expect that the South Vietnamese will lose more battles than they already have, but will ultimately win back whatever territory they may lose.

Because of this, most Administrative analysts believe that the offensive will provide a genuine test of South Vietnam's ability to defend itself—a question that is at the core of the President's Vietnamization program. To be sure, the Saigon troops are being supported by extensive American air support, and may soon get the benefit of American air strikes against North Vietnam, but on the ground, at least, they are on their own.

The officials are reluctant to make any predictions about the outcome in public, however, at least not yet. The memories of 1968, and the credibility problems that were caused by the Johnson Administration's military estimates at the time, are still vivid here.