

Reston Reports

General Giap's Risky Adventure

By James Reston
N.Y. Times Service

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The Communists in Vietnam are now trying to win the war in one decisive stroke, as they defeated the French in the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. It is a bold but puzzling strategy.

For while the enemy has thrown about 35,000 men into the battle just south of the demilitarized zone, and has had some initial success under cover of cloudy weather, there is little chance that they can corner and eliminate the main units of the South Vietnamese before the United States gets the full thump of its airpower into the action.

This is not a Dien Bien Phu situation. The South Vietnamese now have over a million men under arms, and they are not concentrated and vulnerable, as the French were in the bloody ending of the other Indochina war.

Also, the U. S. has more than 500 attack planes in and around Southeast Asia, and these are being steadily reinforced and directed against the larger enemy units now invading South Vietnam, not in scattered guerrilla bands but in classic organized formations.



HOPES

Apparently, General Vo Nguyen Giap, who masterminded the Communist victory at Dien Bien Phu, hopes that dramatic victories in the north around Quang Tri city, and in Binh Long province, 75 miles north of Saigon, would stun and disorganize the entire South Vietnamese defense organization, but this is not likely with American planes dominating the air.

Moreover, the Communists have left themselves vulnerable at the rear. According to Pentagon estimates, 12 of North Vietnam's 14 regular divisions are now operating outside of North Vietnam in Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam.

In this recent invasion operation, Hanoi has openly invaded South Vietnam across the DMZ and increased the risk of a counterattack by air and sea in North Vietnam behind their advancing forces.

Maybe Giap's swift organ-

ized blows, north and south at the same time, can split and paralyze the South, and provide a political capital for the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam, but it is a risky adventure.

TIMING

The intriguing question is why Giap chose to move now. The weather favors the offense, and won't later on, but the U. S. expeditionary force will be down to 69,000 by May 1, and will be below the 50,000 mark a month later, with election pressure on the President to bring most of the remnant home before November.

The speculation in official quarters here is that Hanoi has already discounted the U. S. ground combat forces in Vietnam, now reduced to about 6000, especially since President Nixon has ordered them to stay out of the ground fighting unless they are attacked, and that Giap believes he can defeat the South Vietnamese units, as he did in Laos.

Officials here are not assuming Giap's defeat, though they are reasonably confident the offensive can be contained, and they are even saying once again that if the enemy fails this time, Hanoi will finally agree to a negotiated settlement.

MYSTERY

It has always been a mystery why the Nixon administration thinks the enemy will negotiate a settlement with our forces winding down to 50,000, when Hanoi and the National Liberation Front refused to negotiate and compromise when we had more than 500,000 men in Vietnam, but even the highest officials here are still talking about Giap's "last gasp" and predicting a settlement if the invasion is stopped.

Giap always has the option, which he has taken many times before, of retreating across the Cambodian and Laotian frontiers if his invasion is stopped. He would obviously like to demonstrate that the Communists can defeat the South Vietnamese on the ground, even against American air power.

But if he fails he can always break off the battle and regroup back home. He has not fought and waited for 30 years in order to settle just when the last of the American ground forces are packing up.