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# Hanoi puts a big fly in Nixon's campaign ointment

By ROBERT B. SEMPLE JR.

WASHINGTON — Until a week ago, it would have been the most natural thing in the world for President Nixon to fly to Fort Campbell, Ky., to welcome home the 101st Airborne Division and to thank them for staying the course in Vietnam while he graciously turned the fighting over to the South Vietnamese.

But Nixon found himself in Philadelphia addressing Catholic educators, and one of the reasons for the change in schedule was the conclusion at the White House that a testimonial to the effectiveness of the Vietnamization program might now seem oddly inappropriate.

## Mood changed

The North Vietnamese attacks have changed not only the President's plans but also the mood of the Capitol. Until a few days ago, political Washington assumed that Nixon had positioned himself well for re-election, and its attention was riveted on the apparent inability of the Democrats to organize an effective opposition. But the enemy assaults have changed all that, reminding the confident prognosticators how fragile some of Nixon's strategies really are and how heavily he depends for survival on forces that, in varying degrees, lie outside his control.

Much has been written since the Johnson era about the majesty of the Presidency, its capacity to exist in splendid isolation while controlling not only the policy-making process but the media as well. But as of now Nixon could probably write volumes on its limitations.

## Busing frustrations

Despite a two-year effort to "signal" the courts and the country that he opposed school busing, for example, he could not prevent district judges in Den-

ver, Indianapolis, Richmond and Detroit from ordering widespread transportation to end desegregation.

Despite a devaluation of the dollar and the imposition of wage and price controls, he found that he could not single-handedly stem the tides of international economics or change the rhythm of supply and demand for cattle and hogs.

And despite a long lull in the fighting, dramatically diminished casualties, and frequent public declarations that Vietnamization would succeed, he found he could not control the wishes of the political leaders and military strategists of North Vietnam.

## A different challenge

In strictly political terms, however, the new round of fighting in Vietnam presents him with a different and more delicate challenge than the crises at home. It cannot, his advisers concede, be finished.

Confronted with court decisions mandating busing, Nixon could and did propose legislation to stop it, establishing thereby a visible and saleable position on the issue. Faced with rising food prices, he may still impose sanctions on the farmers, and while this would anger the farmers, it would probably command the sympathy of housewives.

But in Vietnam his room for manipulation and management is smaller and his mandate less clear. As his associates privately concede, the remoteness of the enemy, the weariness of the American people, and (ironically) the momentum of his own disengagement policies have conspired to limit his maneuverability.

## The dilemma

To pull out completely in response to the enemy offensive, for instance, would brand Vietnamization a failure, betray those to whom he has so often promised

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an "honorable" end to the fighting, and might not even placate his critics on the left, who would promptly ask him why he did not withdraw three years ago at far less cost.

For Nixon to pursue the opposite strategy — re-escalation of the conflict on the ground, including perhaps a dramatic landing behind enemy lines — would not be inconceivable given the President's penchant for the "bold stroke," but any such course would seem to require more troops than Nixon's withdrawals have left him with — the ceiling will be 69,000 on May 1 — and would risk immense public furor.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the Washington Special Action Group (Henry Kissinger's WASAG) deliberated this week not about extreme possibilities but about ways of preserving Vietnamization by the tools left to preserve it — namely, American airpower — and the debate revolved around questions of how big the

raids ought to be and how deep they ought to go.

## Republican worries

Yet what worries the Republicans is that even the defense of an established policy by conventional means carries political risk. The enemy thrust is front-page news, which means that Nixon's counterthrust will be front page news. And this can only be helpful to a man like George McGovern, a peace candidate, and harmful to Nixon, who has said privately that he would threaten to pull the rug out from under any opponent who attempted to profit politically from the war in Vietnam.

The interesting thing about Nixon's predicament is that it has not taken him fully by surprise, even though he received different estimates on when the enemy would attack and is still receiving wildly different estimates (to embarrass him before his Moscow trip, to force him into a more generous settlement in Paris, to drive him from office) on why they are attacking.

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