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Kremlin Poses Viet Problems

ONCE AGAIN to the breach. What is there to say about the Vietnam offensive this time around?

Richard Nixon's determination to use air power massively to stay the enemy's juggernaut is not simply a point of pride. Nixon's reaction derives from a commitment to history, annealed by the experiences that led to the second world war. Namely: if you let a military power which is strong enough to disturb the peace of the whole world underwrite armed aggression against a little power, the fabric of peace and stability is ruptured.

That's it; the whole of it. And this time around, the North Vietnamese have conveniently disdained the old fiction that the South Vietnamese war is primarily a civil war. The blitzkrieg from the North, across the DMZ, is of a wholly conventional character — tanks, infantry, artillery: it might as well be the Wehrmacht, marching into Poland.

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ON THE OTHER HAND, Mr. Nixon cannot help but evaluate the threat also in terms of his political future. People are asking, and indeed are entitled to ask: what has happened to Vietnamization? It is almost three years now since the doctrine was articulated at Guam, and although you cannot create effective armies overnight, three years is not overnight.

If we all lived with a chart — something like the chart that is printed in the daily paper during the Community Chest drive, which shows us every day the ascending level of contributions which we know will soon reach the goal . . . and if that chart showed that month after month South Vietnam has developed its capacity to resist until now it is (say) 85 percent prepared, while the day after tomorrow it will be 100 percent, then it would be easier for everyone to understand the necessity for armed aerial intervention by the United States at this point.

But people are asking: Okay, so we succeed this time around. What about next year? What assurances do we have that the Vietnamese are in fact headed towards operational military competence?

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ON THIS POINT Mr. Nixon is in a terrible bind. Vietnamization is his principal doctrinal contribution to the post-cold-war age. Are we now discovering that it doesn't work? Is it only in South Vietnam that it will not work, or is it also elsewhere? Where else?

We have mutual defense treaties with any number of countries, and we have American troops scattered around the world. Is Vietnamization a chimera? If it is, will the collapse of it bring down the whole scaffolding of Mr. Nixon's foreign policy?

Which brings us, obviously, to the question: what is the enemy up to? The enemy in this instance is quite clearly the Soviet Union, so identified quite explicitly by Secretary of Defense Laird, at a recent press conference. Obviously the North Vietnamese were willing and anxious to go along and let us also concede that there were natural factors that were propitious, for instance the weather.

But the scale of it all is Russian — the tanks, the super-modern missiles and equipment. It isn't an absolutely safe rule that the Soviet Union is behind every tactical outburst of the countries it arms, but it is moderately safe to assume that this particular outburst in Southeast Asia was planned and authorized in the Kremlin, that it is designed as a test of Mr. Nixon's will, that it has clearly in mind the effect on American domestic policy, and that it seeks to interrupt whatever reverie was launched at the Peking Summit.

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ADD TO THIS the Kremlin's dream of receiving Richard Nixon in Moscow five weeks from now with North Vietnamese soldiers marching through the streets of the capital city towards whose defense the United States offered up 50,000 American lives.

Under such circumstances the meeting between Kosygin and Nixon might as well be a meeting between Hitler and Petain.

Nixon cannot allow that, and for reasons that go beyond his own chances of re-election. If it becomes that easy to gainsay American stability, American power, and American resolution, the scramble to shed America will become something of a stampede, and all those Americans who are egging on those catalytic developments — Senators Fulbright, Mansfield, McGovern, Kennedy most conspicuously — will find themselves prominent figures in a second-rate nation.

This may have the advantage of nicely complementing their talents. But it is a development a non-partisan Richard Nixon now faces the decisive challenge to prevent.