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The Strategy of Failure

President Nixon's decision to turn the clock back four years by escalating the bombing of North Vietnam from its southern panhandle to the Hanoi-Haiphong area is an exercise in folly and futility. It revives a strategy tried for three years and abandoned finally by President Johnson in 1968 because it was demonstrably a failure. The mystery is why it is being tried again.

Secretary Rogers and the White House in separate statements have indicated that the bombing was meant in part as a threat that Mr. Nixon will "take whatever action is necessary" to halt the North Vietnamese offensive in South Vietnam. The lull that has followed evidently is intended to underline this warning. Both statements ruled out the reintroduction of American ground forces into the war or, of course, the use of nuclear weapons. The threat then, directed presumably at Moscow as well as Hanoi, is that a continued Communist offensive will bring back large-scale bombing of North Vietnam as in 1965-68—extended, perhaps, to the mining or bombing of Haiphong harbor and other ports. But neither Hanoi nor Moscow is likely to be intimidated now by a threat they have already faced down.

Officials in Washington and Saigon acknowledge that the current North Vietnamese offensive is being fueled by supplies already in South Vietnam or nearby. Bombing Haiphong, the so-called "top of the funnel," they assert, is aimed at the supplies that might reach the front during the summer or later and keep the battle going then—at a time even more embarrassing politically for President Nixon. If the Administration's objective is to prevent this, it is doomed in advance to fail.

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As long ago as July 1966, the C.I.A. and the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency reported that sixteen months of bombing North Vietnam "had had no measurable direct effect on Hanoi's ability to mount and support military operations in the South." Moreover, the intelligence estimate concluded that this situation was "not likely to be altered" by mining Haiphong and other harbors or adopting other military proposals then contemplated for expanding the air offensive.

A year later, after the air offensive had been expanded in most proposed ways except for hitting Haiphong harbor, Defense Secretary McNamara reported that "there continues to be no sign that the bombing has reduced Hanoi's will to resist, or her ability to ship the necessary supplies south."

The risk of conflict with the Soviet Union and China dissuaded President Johnson from attacking Haiphong harbor. He concluded that the Communist superpowers were more likely to increase their involvement than to back down if their supply ships were sunk. The damage reported by Moscow to four of its ships last weekend, although American planes had orders to avoid Haiphong harbor, emphasizes the danger.

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President Nixon may be prepared to run this risk. He may be gambling that the Soviet Union will restrain Hanoi or restrict its supply flow rather than accept a confrontation that would endanger Mr. Nixon's May 22 visit to Moscow and, with it, such other Soviet objectives as a strategic arms agreement, increased trade with the United States and Bonn's ratification of the German-Soviet treaty and the European status quo.

But a SALT agreement and détente in Europe are as much Mr. Nixon's objectives as the Kremlin's, and they are important to his re-election campaign. Is he prepared to risk them and the peace of the world by going beyond implied threats of a naval-air blockade of Haiphong—which are unlikely to intimidate Moscow— to the reality? Does he dream of turning Soviet supply ships around in the Gulf of Tonkin the way President Kennedy turned them around during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962?

One danger is that the Soviet Union may feel that Mr. Nixon is bluffing and, calling him, find that he is not. Since the Cambodian invasion of 1970, the President's aides have boasted of Mr. Nixon's "unpredictability." The stakes are too high for the nation or the Congress any longer to accept such risks.