

Ominous tension in capital over bad news from Vietnam

[Slightly fuller column filed Nix Ad.]

New Orleans States-Item

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WASHINGTON—The impression is growing here that North Vietnam's capacities for sustained challenge in South Vietnam have been underestimated and perhaps misjudged as badly as they were during the engagements in Cambodia and Laos in 1970 and 1971.

Government officials are extremely wary of discussing current intelligence estimates, or even of comparing them with the judgment of a fortnight ago. But the sense of doubt and foreboding is contributing to an ominous though unarticulated tension in this capital while discouraging reports from Vietnam keep rolling in.

Anxiety about estimate

There is anxiety about the military estimates because large diplomatic and political stakes ride on them. There is anxiety about the forbearance of the American public. And there is anxiety about President Nixon's threatened retaliation if he should come to feel betrayed or trapped by events.

Rarely is that mood expressed in so many words. Congress is remarkably placid about the war news, probably because members are confused and afraid to make matters worse. The State Department is engaged in technical quarrels with Hanoi about the mostly meaningless public statements on negotiating terms. The White House, trying to avoid the appearance of distress, was able to produce a positive headline with news of the arms-control talks.

The tension grows

But the tension grows as the war news points in one direction while Nixon stiffens his threats and commitments in another. Addressing prominent Texan Republicans and Democrats Sunday night, the President raised a warning of more bombardment of North Vietnam, even though most of his advisers think the issue must now be decided on the ground in South Vietnam, and he reiterated yet again his views, both global and highly personal, of the stakes of battle.

The basis of the President's sturdy resolve are the encouraging reports that he continues to attribute to his battlefield commander, Gen. Creighton Abrams. In perspective, Nixon said again Sunday night, "We can expect some days when the news may be a South Vietnamese setback and other days when it will be otherwise." And indeed, some solace is drawn here from the heroic resistance offered by at least some of Saigon's troops.

Not at all the comforts

But the developments that are now being called comforting are not at all the comforts anticipated even two weeks ago. And from

the perspective of a year, even the President's toughest assertions of endurance contain a retreating definition of his military objectives and South Vietnam's achievements.

A year ago, in defining what he termed the success of the effort to cut North Vietnam's supply lines through Laos, Nixon argued that "as in Cambodia, what is important is not the instant analysis of the

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moment, but what happens in the future."

He said the South Vietnamese had fought effectively against the "very best" troops Hanoi could field. And he said the disruption of enemy supply lines and consumption of men and arms had damaged North Vietnam's capability "to sustain major offensives in South Vietnam" even more than the earlier raids into Cambodia.

'Vietnamization has succeeded'

"Consequently tonight," the President asserted on April 7, 1971, "I can report that Vietnamization has succeeded . . . the American involvement in Vietnam is coming to an end. The day the South Vietnamese can take over their own defense is in sight."

Analysts were confident

Even as the North Vietnamese offensive took shape a month ago, the analysts here were confident that the enemy could sustain himself only for a few weeks before stretched supply lines and poor weather took their toll. Some setbacks in northern South Vietnam were anticipated, but by last week even that threat was minimized.

But in recent days, it has become clear that the North Vietnamese are expending supplies at a furious pace on at least three different fronts, including some far from home. They are being resupplied much more effectively than had been thought possible, and at least some American field commanders now think the offensive may endure for quite a time.

The new fear

In essence, the President's view of the battle now depends on the estimate that the enemy offensive is a "desperate gamble" of limited duration that Saigon needs only to survive for a time in order to win at least two more years of relative calm. The new fear among at least some officials and analysts is that Hanoi has again been underestimated, that its campaign will be sustained and progressively more difficult to bear, with unpredictable consequences on morale in South Vietnam, on the mood of the American people and the response of the President.